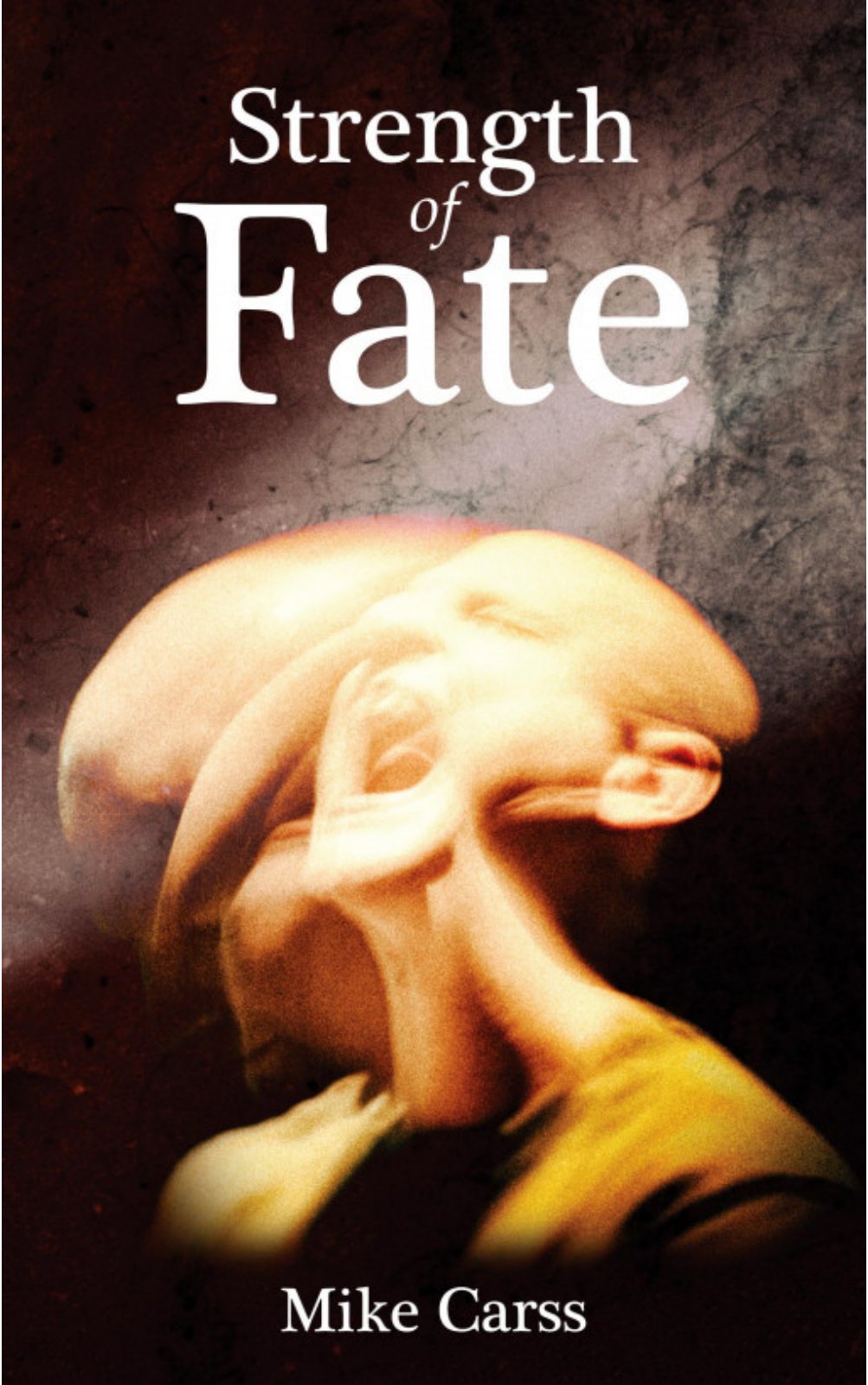
Strength of Fate



Mike Carss

Strength of Fate

by Mike Carss

Cover Photo: Fen

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My thanks to Kenny
who rekindled the spark

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Chapter One

Had Nathan been told a year ago he'd try to join the Adventurer's Guild, he would've laughed in their face, yet here he stood within the walled courtyard of the guild's headquarters in Croydon. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he surveyed the central building. It towered above the surrounding estates and properties—quite a sight to behold.

A motley crowd of men and women, armed and armoured, milled about and chatted in small groups. Members scanned job boards, groups formed to leave with orders in hand, and others perused the various traders and merchants. The constant din was deafening.

Brohm stood at Nathan's side, equally intrigued by the view. Easily a head taller than Nathan, the big man had a clear view of their destination.

"Over there," he said, pointing at a sign hanging over an open doorway. "Head office."

Both of them felt completely out of place, dodging a sea of people seemingly intent on running them down. Brohm used his large stature—equal parts muscle and fat—to force his way through the throng, allowing Nathan to follow in his wake. Upon crossing the doorway's threshold, they found an empty reception area. A man sat behind a desk, surrounded by mounds of paperwork.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Nathan nodded in greeting. "We're here to see Ryan Shaw about starting a new guild branch in Millsfield," he said, handing over the letter sent to them.

The receptionist unfurled the document and skimmed through it briefly. "Very well. Please wait while I fetch Mr. Shaw."

While he hurried to the back offices, Nathan and Brohm glanced at the large looking glass hung on the wall. In its reflection, strangers stared back at them. Nathan could never get used to seeing those faces, but for the rest of the world, this is what they saw. A perfect illusion given to them by a witch named Morgana.

After a moment, the receptionist returned with a tall man following behind.

"Nice to finally meet you, boys. I'm Ryan Shaw."

Nathan offered his hand in greeting. "Likewise. I'm Whitter, and this is my partner, Sid."

Of course, their names were a lie as well, but considering they both had bounties on their heads, using real names would've been counterproductive.

Brohm shook Shaw's hand in kind. "Hullo."

"Please, this way."

He led them a few steps down the hallway to his office. They sat opposite

his desk while Shaw ruffled through some papers in a drawer. Pulling one document from a file, he placed it on the table. It was their original written request.

"I have to say, when I read this letter of yours, I was intrigued. Traders west of the Great Divide, yet trained in arms. A rare breed."

The story was a loose interpretation of the truth. While Nathan did hail from the western steppes, his past was one of assassination, not trade. Brohm lived locally his entire life, working a stint for the military before being drawn by coin to the seedy underbelly of cutthroats and strongarms.

Three months prior, while running from the bounty placed upon them, they found Morgana. In trade for a magickal necklace, she spelled their appearance. It offered them a free ticket to start their lives over again, and they had no interest associating with the wrong crowd again. While neither man openly admitted it, they deemed running a branch of the Adventurer's Guild—a service provided to everyone in the lands—to be their way to atone for the deeds of their past.

"The western steppes are rough lands," Nathan said. "To survive as a trader, you need to know how to protect yourself and your goods."

Impressed by the statement, the tall man's eyes widened. "I look forward to seeing what you can offer the guild. We'll set you up with your first assignment—"

"Assignment?" Brohm asked.

"Well, yes. There's a probationary period for all new recruits before they can access all the guild's services. Being a part of it carries a prestigious title people work toward. For some, it can take years before earning the lowest rank."

Brohm stood up. "Rank? Years? What?"

Nathan took hold of his arm and pulled him back into the chair. "We weren't aware of this. Our understanding was we only had to pay in to become part of the guild and build a new branch. You even said our request was approved in the letter."

Shaw let out a thin sigh. "I apologize for the misunderstanding. You still need to prove yourself first." He pointed at the letter. "Words are one thing, but for us, we need to see the truth in action. We don't want unseasoned fighters in our ranks. It's dangerous, and would show the guild in a bad light to our clients. Rest assured, if you prove yourself, we'll fast-track you through the system. We're in dire need of a branch in Millsfield and willing to bend the rules in this case, but we can't break them outright."

"Okay, those are fair points," Nathan said, "but what will it take to prove our worth to the guild?"

"That's up to Laird," Shaw said. "I do hope you're still willing to go through with this."

Brohm looked over to Nathan and shrugged his shoulders. "Reckon so. Who's Laird?"

“He’ll be the one leading the assignment and act as your supervisor. I’ll have him ready to meet you tomorrow at first light near the job board. You can’t miss him. Stout, shaved head, giant beard.” Shaw stood and offered his hand. “I look forward to hearing his report.”

Both men shook his hand before leaving the office. They waded through the crowds, back to the main street, and toward the inn where they’d stabled their horses.

“Assignments . . .” Brohm grumbled.

“Don’t sweat it, big guy. Who knows, maybe it’ll be fun.”

“Oh, fun . . .”

Nathan ignored his sarcasm. “We knew going in that we’d be doing jobs.”

“Yuh, but I wanted to be able to pick and choose what we did.”

“Well, Shaw made a good point. He doesn’t know who we are. You can’t blame him for wanting some kind of proof.”

They arrived at the inn and stepped inside. Being midafternoon, the taproom was muted with only a few patrons at the bar.

Brohm signalled the owner. “Ales for me and my buddy, yuh?”

The barkeep nodded, and they sat down at an empty table away from the others.

“Once this stupid ‘prove ourselves’ thing is done, reckon we’ll have to decide pretty quick where to build our guildhouse,” Brohm said.

“I still think that old inn on the outskirts of Millsfield would work.”

“I dunno. It looked pretty rough.”

“We talked about this earlier. There’s no way we have enough coin saved to pay for materials and men to build a place from scratch.”

The barkeep arrived with their ales, and Nathan handed him a few coppers along with a tip.

“What’s the harm in taking a closer look at that inn?” Nathan asked. “We only saw it from the road.”

“Yuh, okay. We’ll check it out when we get back to Millsfield,” he said glumly before taking a draught of his cold beer.

Nathan joined him, but only took a sip. “What’s wrong?”

Planting the tankard on the table, Brohm considered the question before answering. “I dunno. Reckon I just liked the idea of building a new place together, like a new home, y’know?”

A smile crept across Nathan’s face, and he reached out to hold Brohm’s hand. “We can make any place a home for us. It doesn’t need to be new to make it special.”

* * *

The following morning, Nathan and Brohm rode their horses back to the

guild's headquarters. At the early hour, the courtyard was deserted, yet a mess of scattered bootprints on the dusty street belied the area's usual traffic.

A man stood near the job posting boards, matching Shaw's description. His bald head stood out in stark contrast to his dense beard, shaped like a beehive. He wore thick, well-travelled leather armour, a short sword hung from his belt, and a large shield was strapped to his back.

"I'm Laird," he said as they drew near. "You the new recruits?"

"Yes," Nathan said.

"Yes, *sir!*" Laird corrected. "You're late."

Brohm surreptitiously rolled his eyes at Nathan. "Oh gods, it feels like I'm in the army again," he mumbled.

"Just play along," Nathan replied.

"What are you two jabbering about?"

"Nothing . . . sir," Nathan said. "Could you fill us in on the assignment?"

"It's an escort mission. A dignitary needs to get to Aylesbury."

"That's a fair ride, isn't it?"

"Aye. Six days. More if weather's bad." He turned to lead them out of the courtyard, but then stopped in his tracks to glare at them. "Where are your weapons?"

Brohm pointed at the gate entrance. "Weapons are stowed with the horses."

"A blade doesn't do you any good if you can't wield it. I never want to see either of you unarmed again. Is that understood?"

The man turned and walked away before they could answer.

Brohm stared incredulously at Nathan. "Reckon this is *not* gonna be fun."

"C'mon, big guy. Once we're out on the road, it'll be fine."

Brohm grumbled as they donned their weapons while Laird impatiently looked on. Nathan sheathed his dagger, then slung his bow and quiver over his shoulder. Brohm tightened the belt for his longsword.

"Alright, mount up and follow me," Laird ordered.

Dust rose in their wake as they rode through the empty streets. The shops and buildings soon grew in size and stature, culminating to a grand estate. Waiting at the main entrance sat a carriage covered in blue silk, tied down tight to avoid flapping in the breeze. Four horsemen carrying standards stood at each corner.

Upon hearing their arrival, a man's face appeared from behind a silken flap.

"You're late!" he said with a huff.

"My apologies, sir," Laird said, giving Nathan and Brohm a knowing stare.

He waved them away impatiently. "Very well. Lead on."

The three turned and trotted toward the town's western exit, forming a triangle with Laird in the lead. The four horsemen expertly held themselves in formation at each corner of the carriage.

“Is everyone a whiny slog in this town?” Brohm whispered hoarsely to Nathan.

Nathan couldn’t help chuckling under his breath. They shared a private wink, easing the mood.

The arid landscape greeted them after passing through the wide gateway out of town. Flanked by mountain ranges to the north and south, the valley remained an abnormally hot area where rain rarely fell. Being in the middle of the autumn season, the road was safe to travel. During the high summer months, however, careful planning was required. Regardless, the northern trade routes were preferred at any time of year, and as such, the road before them was rarely used. Patrols were unheard of, making it ideal for raiders. Ultimately, the road existed for emergencies only, and as a shortcut for those who were willing to take the risk.

Laird signalled Nathan and Brohm to his flank as they rode. “Alright, men. You’ll be scouting ahead, keeping pace at one hundred metres.” He handed Brohm a small curved horn attached to a leather thong. “If trouble spots you, blow this three times and fall back to the carriage.”

Brohm hung it around his neck. “Yes, sir.”

Nathan was surprised to hear him acknowledge Laird properly, but figured Brohm knew it was best not to provoke their leader any further.

“I’ve got my own horn here,” Laird continued. “One blast means we’re stopping and for you to return. If you hear three, get your asses back here, fast.”

“Got it, sir,” Nathan said.

“Good. Get out there. Remember, one hundred metres, but always stay in visual contact.”

They wasted no time and galloped west, keeping an eye on their distance from the carriage. The surrounding area was littered with rocks and sturdy desert plants. The mountains lining the north and south horizons made for an obvious passage, and aside from small dunes, there was no place for attackers to hide.

“Reckon this’ll be simple enough,” Brohm said.

“I wouldn’t expect attacks so close to town, but don’t let your guard down.”

“I never do. You know that.”

Nathan chuckled. He was right. Brohm tended to have an instinct for spotting trouble before it developed.

The day wore on tediously with little change in the environment. Near nightfall, a solid horn blast signalled the end of the day’s trek. By the time they arrived, the horsemen were in the process of raising a large tent. The carriage rider tended to a fire, preparing a large pot to sit atop it.

Laird approached them as they dismounted. “Anything to report?”

“No, sir,” Nathan said. “The land’s empty. An ambush would be difficult here.”

“Aye, though I suspect the last leg of the journey will be a different story.”

Brohm nodded absentmindedly, his eyes wandering back to the pot.

“I think your friend is hungry,” Laird said.

Nathan patted Brohm’s belly. “Yeah, he’s got an appetite.”

“Hey! I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Oh-ho, don’t you worry, big fella,” Laird said. “They’re cooking enough for the whole lot of us.”

“Oh, good,” Brohm said, leaving the group to visit the cook.

“Listen, I’d like to apologize for this morning,” Nathan said.

“That’s fine. Let’s call it first-day jitters and forget about it. But don’t think you can slack off.” He jabbed a finger to his chest. “You’re here to prove your worth to the guild, and I don’t accept mistakes.”

“Yes, sir.”

The stout man gave him a sly grin. “Aye, keep that up and you’ll do fine.”

They turned their attention to the dignitary standing nearby. He cast a privileged and entitled air, and likely had never done anything for himself in his life. He waited impatiently while his men hammered in the last of the tent stakes, and moved in furnishings from the carriage.

“So, who are we protecting?” Nathan asked Laird.

“Senator Corbett.”

“And does he always require an extra detail of men from the guild when he travels?”

“Aye. We offer our services to many senators and governing officials. It’s good coin for us and generally easy work.”

“You’re not expecting a specific threat?”

“No. Highwaymen sometimes attack to loot, or if the person’s important enough, they’ll kidnap for coin. Our man here isn’t really worth their time.”

“Maybe so,” Nathan said, “but his outward appearance says otherwise. It could bring trouble.”

For the first time, Laird looked upon Nathan with a modicum of respect as he considered his words. The smells emanating from the fire pulled them closer to Brohm, who had chummed up to the cook stirring the pot—it held some kind of meat stew.

“Randy here says it’ll be ready soon,” Brohm said.

They waited patiently while the first portion was served to the senator in his tent, followed by his four men. Brohm was pleased to find much stew still left in the pot, and after thanking Randy, he wolfed it down.

Night fell, bringing a cool breeze with it. It was decided two men should be on watch at all times. The four guards picked their own shifts, independent of Laird’s team. Before Nathan or Brohm could voice their decision, Laird spoke out.

“I’ll be taking first watch tonight. You two decide who gets middle shift.”

“I’ll do it tonight,” Brohm said, then looked to Nathan. “You do it tomorrow?”

Nathan shook his hand. “Deal!”

* * *

Their travels remained uneventful for the following two days. No passing travellers nor any sign of highwaymen. However, by the end of the third day, the monotonous and dry countryside began to transform. The mountains to the north and south diminished, giving way to green shrubbery and small trees.

By midmorning of the fourth day, hillocks stippled with large boulders forced them to travel at a slower pace. Tree-laden serpentine valleys brought additional difficulty, requiring them to stop at regular intervals in order to stay within visual range of the carriage.

“Definitely ambush territory,” Nathan said to Brohm.

“Yuh. Y’know it’s funny. Not that long ago, I’d be the one doing the ambushing. It feels weird being on the other side.”

“I know. Protecting a senator instead of killing one definitely feels strange.” They shared a laugh. “But what I really want to know is—”

Brohm cut him off, signalling to stop. He dismounted and handed the reins to Nathan, then jogged a short distance ahead. The road curved left around a large slab of rock jutting from the ground. Using it as cover, he peeked around the corner.

“What is it?” Nathan whispered when Brohm returned.

“Reckon a dozen men. They’re armed. Looks like a roadblock.”

Nathan cursed under his breath.

“We could take ’em,” Brohm said with a smirk.

“Are you crazy? Those odds aren’t great. We need to tell Laird.”

Brohm mounted up, and they headed back to the group. As soon as Laird saw their approach, he pulled his sword free.

“Trouble?” he asked.

“Looks like it, sir,” Brohm said. “Armed men blocking the road.”

“Brigands?”

The big man shrugged. “Reckon so. They don’t look friendly.”

Laird signalled to the horsemen. “Two of you stay behind with the senator. Everyone else on me.”

They headed back to the rock slab, and Laird surveyed the situation.

“I’d prefer to circle around, but the land’s too uneven for the carriage to travel on. We’ve got to deal with them.”

The two guards glanced at each other, then one of them spoke. “Sir, are you sure that’s a good—”

“You’ve got a better idea?”

The man opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came. Instead, he shook his head.

Laird pointed at Nathan. “You good with that bow?”

“From a high position, I could take out two or three of them before they realize where the arrows are coming from.”

Laird stared at him blankly. “Aye? Okay, but I’ll believe that when I see it. Sid, you’re with me.” He pointed at the guards. “I want you two behind that boulder to flank them when they arrive.”

They nodded and pulled their blades free, then hunkered behind cover. Brohm interlocked his fingers to give Nathan a boost and clamber up the big rock. From this vantage point, Nathan had an excellent view of the road ahead. The brigands were in small groups, thirty metres away. Some were sitting, others were standing, but all seemed relaxed. Nathan smiled inwardly. With the element of surprise on their side, they might just win this.

“Ready when you are,” Laird whispered to him, readying his shield.

Nathan nocked an arrow and stared past the shaft. He chose his targets, imagining the outcome to best guess the future position of each man. Emptying his lungs, he pulled back, aimed, and released the arrow. No sooner had it left the bow, he reached for another, nocked, aimed, and fired. He pulled another, and then assessed the situation while aiming. Two men were down. The rest were alarmed, but none could pinpoint his position.

The third arrow flew, and he pulled another from his quiver. Aim, fire. Shouts rose from the group. Weapons were drawn. Aiming the fifth arrow, he realized the fourth had flown wide. He fired at the target again, hitting his mark square in the face. One of the brigands finally caught sight of his position, and after pointing him out, charged with a bellow.

A sixth arrow shot into the mob, and another man fell. A seventh scraped harmlessly off a helmet. By that point, they’d reached his rock and were trying to climb up. Brohm and Laird realized they weren’t coming around to their side, and charged at them with swords slashing. Proving to be a more dangerous target, the brigands ignored Nathan to defend against their new foes. Using that opportunity, Nathan pulled another arrow from his quiver and aimed nearly point blank at the top of a brigand’s head. The poor fool never knew what hit him.

The two guards joined the fray, attempting to push back the diminishing forces. Brohm parried and slashed with ease, making quick work of his attackers. Laird’s stout stature allowed him to bash his opponents down with his shield before finishing them off.

Morale lost, the remaining men fell back into retreat. Brohm rushed forward to end them, but Laird grabbed his shoulder, holding him back.

“Don’t bother,” Laird said.

Chest heaving, Brohm tried to pull free of his grasp and shot an angry glare.

“What’re you doing? We kill ’em now. Otherwise, they’ll get their buddies and come back.”

“Nah, they’re common rabble. We showed ’em we aren’t to be reckoned

with. They won't be back."

Nathan watched the last few brigands mount their horses and gallop away. Not one glanced back.

"I think he's right. We slaughtered them."

Brohm, still trying to catch his breath, shrugged away Laird's grip, then wiped his blade clean on a brigand's tunic.

"I like to finish what I start . . . *sir*."

Laird's eyes narrowed at Brohm's sardonic comment, but held back the choice words written on his face. Instead, he busied himself wiping his own blade clean while Brohm stormed away into the forest. Nathan jumped down from his perch.

"You two fight well for traders," Laird said. "And I'll admit you surprised me, Whitter. You're good with that bow."

"I appreciate that," Nathan said flatly.

Laird gave him another stare before shifting his gaze to Brohm in the distance. "Get your partner in line."

He left Nathan and approached the two guards to assess their situation. After adjusting his bow and quiver, Nathan found Brohm staring out into the trees.

"You okay, big guy?"

Brohm let out a purging sigh and wiped sweat from his brow. "I'm fine. Just pissed."

"You should probably apologize to Laird."

Brohm rolled his eyes. "What's the point?"

"We're trying to make a good impression, remember?"

"You just killed how many guys? And I took care of my fair share. How can he not be impressed?"

"C'mon Brohm, you were in the army. It's obvious there's a chain of command here, and right now, we're at the bottom. Once we pass these tests, things will be different."

"But what if it's not that way? What if we always have to follow someone's orders?"

Nathan shrugged. "Then we walk."

"Yuh? Okay, I'm glad to hear you say that."

"I don't like this any more than you do, but if it means we can start our own branch and reap the rewards, I'm willing to jump through some hoops to get there."

Brohm nodded reluctantly. "You're right. Sorry for getting angry."

Wrapping an arm around Brohm's waist, Nathan pulled him close. "Sometimes you're cute when you're angry."

"Shut up," Brohm replied, shoving him playfully, yet still hard enough to nearly knock him off his feet.

They rejoined the group, and Brohm took Laird aside to chat. Nathan joined the guards, who stopped talking when he arrived and offered him

curious looks.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," he said.

"Laird said you're good with a bow," one of them remarked. "I'd say that's an understatement."

"Well, uhm—"

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" another asked.

"Just practice, I guess."

"Who trained you?"

"Nobody you'd know."

They continued to stare at him, now in open awe. Nathan anxiously avoided their gaze and carefully ambled away.

"Whitter!" Laird called out. "Get over here."

Brohm, standing beside Laird, looked at Nathan with concern.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Nathan asked.

"Something doesn't seem to add up. No trader I've dealt with can fight like you two."

"I beg to differ, sir. Traders from the western steppes do."

"I don't care where you're from. Traders don't know how to use a sword that well, and traders aren't able to down that many men with a bow." Laird's stern eyes shifted back and forth between the two silent men. "Shaw might believe your lies, but I can see right through them."

Nathan tried his best to sound relaxed. "Sir, I can understand your confusion. A trader's life here is different than where we're from. Bandits are commonplace. We have to be competent fighters to survive."

"Yuh, that's one of the reasons we left," Brohm chimed in. "It's no easy life."

The stout man was about to offer his rebuttal before being interrupted by a guard.

"Sir, Senator Corbett is waiting."

Laird grumbled under his breath. "Alright. Men, get those bodies off the road. We're moving out."

Nathan and Brohm tried to sneak away, but Laird stood in their way and pointed a meaty finger at them.

"This conversation isn't over."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

"You two scout on ahead. We'll catch up. Stay vigilant."

They gathered their horses and left the group in haste.

"What you reckon we should do?" Brohm asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Just keep to the story. Deny anything else."

* * *

That evening, both men tried their best to keep busy and dodge Laird's ability to corner them with questions. Nathan used his newfound interest from the guards to act as a shield, and Brohm kept company with Randy the cook, offering to help.

Their camp sat on an embankment twenty metres from the road. Surrounded by sparse deciduous forest with some undergrowth, it gave them a tactical advantage against attacks during the night.

As soon as Nathan was done eating, he stood up and checked his dagger in its sheath.

"I'll take first watch," he announced before dashing off into the shadow of the trees.

He found a boulder and clambered atop it, keeping an eye on Laird as much as the surrounding darkness. Brohm helped Randy clean up, and then he settled down with his bedroll far away from Laird. It was obvious the stout man wanted to talk to Brohm, but for whatever reason, he let him be.

The camp was soon fast asleep, and all was still. The chirp of insects and forlorn calls of nightbirds kept Nathan company while he stared into the dark, looking and listening for trouble. Hours passed, and the light of the campfire lazily dwindled to a dull glow.

A snapping branch caught his attention, followed by soft footsteps coming from the camp's direction. He crouched low, trying to determine the source, but the light was too dim to catch any detail. He silently slid down the far side of the boulder, freed his dagger, and crept to flank the stalker.

"Don't move," he said.

The shadowy figure jumped. "Gods, Whitter. Where did you come from?" It was Laird, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Nathan jammed his dagger back into its sheath. "If you need to take a piss, there's no need to go so deep into the bush. We're all men here."

"No, I was looking for you."

"Right now's not a good time," he said, heading back to the boulder.

Laird followed in his wake. "Listen, you understand that I need to know the truth about you two."

"We told you the truth."

"It's obvious you were never traders."

Nathan turned to confront him. "Yeah? Why's that?"

"Because traders have a way about them, and neither of you show that behaviour."

"That's because traders around here have it easy."

"Aye. You keep saying that, but I still don't buy it."

"I don't care what you think. It's the truth."

Laird didn't back down, instead grabbing Nathan's collar. "You better care. Shaw might be in charge of the guild, but I'm the one who says who's in, and who's not."

"You better get your hand off my friend, or you'll lose it." It was Brohm.

"I'm the one who gives orders around here," Laird said, letting go of Nathan's collar in spite of himself.

"You can order us all you like, and we'll follow them," Brohm said. "But the second you lay a hand on us—"

"Whoa, okay." Nathan moved between them. "Let's just slow down here."

"You see? This is what I'm talking about," Laird said. "Even if being a trader in the western lands was tough, you'd never see one trying to *start* a fight."

"Why don't we just tell him the truth?" Brohm said.

Nathan couldn't believe what he was hearing. "*Sid*!"

"Oh-ho! I knew it," Laird said. "Spill it, then."

Before Nathan could consider an alternate story, Brohm launched his own. "Okay, we're from the western steppes, but we're not traders. Fine. You saw through the lie, and I actually respect that. The reason we lied is because we deserted our post."

"Your post?" Laird asked. "You're soldiers?"

"Well, reckon not anymore. If we went back, we'd be strung up."

Nathan stood still as stone, blank-faced, waiting for Brohm to continue weaving his story.

"Once the king died, the queen took control. Everyone knew she was crazy, paranoid, but they never had any kids so the throne was hers. Soon, things changed. We were getting orders to kill innocent people—civilians. Whitter and me? We didn't want no part of that, so we left. We took our chances and got hired as mercs to protect a caravan across the Great Divide."

Laird silently considered his story, eyeing them suspiciously. "But why lie to the guild?"

"We left our post. Lots of folk would look down on us for doing that."

Laird nodded. "Aye. Cowards desert their post."

Brohm took a step closer. "We're no cowards."

"I suppose after seeing you two in action today, I'd have to agree with that."

"Yuh. We left not 'cause we were scared, but 'cause we didn't want to kill those people."

Laird nodded reluctantly.

"This needs to be kept secret, sir," Nathan said.

"Aye? You're asking a lot from me."

"Please. We don't want any trouble. We just want to be part of the guild."

"Why join us? Why not the army?"

Brohm cringed.

"Let's just say army life left a bad taste in our mouth," Nathan said.

Laird grunted his understanding. "I'll need time to think about this. The guild looks down on this sort of behaviour, regardless of intention. If you lie to us once, what's to stop you from doing it again?"

Neither Nathan nor Brohm could provide an answer.

After a moment, Laird sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

A wave of relief swept across Nathan. “I appreciate you considering it, sir.”

“Alright. Wake me up when it’s my shift for watch.”

The stout man left Brohm and Nathan behind, heading back to camp. Nathan waited, peeking around to make sure Laird wasn’t eavesdropping, then slapped Brohm’s belly.

“How’d you come up with that?” he whispered, grinning ear to ear. “It was genius.”

Brohm shrugged. “Dunno. It just sorta came out. He wanted another story, so I gave him one.”

“You scared me something awful at first. I thought you were going to tell him the *real* truth.”

“I’m not that dumb.” Brohm chuckled and knocked his shoulder. “Alright, I’ll take watch. You get some sleep.”

“You sure? It’s not time yet.”

“Yuh, but I’m up now.”

Nathan gave Brohm’s arm a squeeze. “Okay. Thanks, big guy.”

“Hold up.”

Nathan turned just as Brohm pulled him up into his arms and kissed him. The surprise of it stunned Nathan for a moment before he managed to return it.

“Sorry,” Brohm said as he pulled away. “I just miss you, y’know? Can’t really cuddle in camp.”

Nathan’s face felt flushed. “Never apologize for kisses.”

Brohm wore a lewd grin, then turned him toward the camp and swatted his behind.

“Get to bed.”

Nathan stumbled away, light-headed, wearing a drunken smile. Brohm often had that effect on him, and he loved it.

* * *

The sun was still below the horizon when Nathan found himself shaken awake by Laird.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, yawning.

“Nothing. I just want to get an early start.”

“What about Corbett? Is he going to like getting up this early?”

Laird grunted. “I’ll leave that up to his men.”

After much cursing from the senator, the crew were on their way. Within hours, they hit a road junction, and turned right to take the northeastern route.

Dense forest flanked the western side, its leaves bearing a hint of autumnal colour. Nathan and Brohm kept to scouting ahead, peering into the shade of the thick woods for anyone who might decide to waylay them. By midafternoon, ominous clouds roiled in from beyond the treeline, bringing with it the threat of heavy rainfall.

"Laird mentioned there's an inn on this road, near where we'd turn west toward Aylesbury," Brohm said.

"Yeah? That'd be nice." Nathan craned his neck, looking for a gap in the canopy. "I can't tell if those clouds are gonna blow through, but I'd be willing to get wet now for a warm room later."

"Reckon a bed would do good for my back, too."

"It's getting on in the day, though. I wonder if we'll continue on or stop early for the night."

In answer to Nathan's question, a single horn blast told them to fall back. They arrived to find the men raising the tent for the senator.

"We're still two or three hours away from the inn," Laird said. "I don't like the look of that weather, so we're hunkering down here for the night."

Brohm muttered his disappointment under his breath. Laird had made the right call, though. The wind whipped up, thrashing tree limbs and causing leaves to fly in all directions. They rapidly secured their horses to a tree trunk and searched for shelter, but could find none other than the thinning canopy above.

After a violent yet short-lived downfall, steady showers continued into the evening hours. Despite multiple attempts, none could get a fire lit, and the gloomy skies brought a dark night.

Laird announced he would take first watch, leaving Nathan and Brohm to huddle together for warmth. Brohm always radiated an intense heat—much to his dismay during the summer months—but at times like this, Nathan appreciated it. And any excuse he could get to snuggle up to Brohm was always welcome.

Three of the senator's men and the carriage rider sat nearby, wet and miserable, huddled under a thick blanket. The fourth man arrived an hour later to switch shifts with another.

"No sleep for us tonight, eh?" the new arrival said.

"Reckon not," Brohm mumbled.

Later into the night, Laird emerged from the gloom, finding Nathan and Brohm in a hazy state between consciousness and uneasy rest.

"Who's next?"

Brohm unwrapped himself from Nathan and rose to his feet. "I'll take next watch, sir."

"Just patrol the tent with the guard."

Laird sat beside Nathan, and waited until Brohm was gone before speaking. "You two seem close."

"Yeah, we've been through a lot together."

"Aye? How long have you known each other?"

Without thinking, Nathan almost told him the truth. He'd only met Brohm a couple of months ago, yet it felt like an age had passed.

"It feels like I've known him forever."

The answer must've been satisfactory because the stout man fell silent. The rain finally subsided some time later, and gradually, the sky cleared. It was a moonless night, yet the stars provided a hint of light.

Nathan was exhausted. Sitting hunched over cramped his muscles, and wet clothes made it impossible to sleep soundly. None of this bothered Laird, who had managed to nod off with his beard resting against his chest. Nathan decided to stretch his legs, and approached the senator's tent to find Brohm. The big man's silhouette tensed up, and cautiously reached for his sword as he neared.

"It's me," Nathan whispered.

Brohm relaxed and drew near. "Can't sleep?" he asked in a hushed tone.

"No. Legs are killing me."

"At least the rain stopped, yuh?"

"Where's the other guard?" Nathan asked.

Brohm thumbed to the opposite side of the tent. Wanting to escape the dripping foliage overhead, Nathan stepped away from the tent onto the road to gaze at the night sky. Brohm joined him, wrapping an arm over his shoulders. Nathan leaned into his warmth.

"When you mentioned that inn earlier," Nathan said, "the first thing I thought was us between the sheets."

Brohm chuckled under his breath. "The first thing I thought of was a nice, cold, tasty ale. And *then* ruining your backside."

Nathan was about to laugh, only to be interrupted by the sound of something heavy smacking the wet ground. Nathan had enough experience to know the sound of a body slumping into mud.

"That came from the tent," Brohm said, pulling his blade free. "You check inside."

Nathan burst through the tent flap. A dim candle lit the space, revealing the senator lying in his bed. He rushed to his side to shake him awake.

"W-wha—what's the meaning of this?" the old man bellowed.

"You're okay?"

"What do you mean? Of course I'm—"

"Over here!" Brohm called out.

Nathan left the senator to his babbling and bolted outside, finding Brohm kneeling over a body.

"It's the guard. He's dead."

Yells erupted from the trees, punctuated by the ring of steel on steel. Laird and the other men were under attack.

"You go," Nathan said. "I'll stay with the senator."

Brohm nodded and ran headlong into the trees, wet branches smacking his

face. Nathan rushed back to the tent and pulled back the flap to reveal a brigand using the senator as a shield, holding a blade to his throat. The old man croaked and swallowed hard, fear staining his features.

"Here's the deal," the brigand said. "My boys're busy finishing off the others. You run now, and we won't come after ya."

Nathan turned sideways to peer outside, surreptitiously freeing his dagger out of sight, then took a cautious step into the tent.

The brigand tensed. "Stay back, or he dies."

"I doubt you'll do that. You want him alive, otherwise, you would've killed him already."

"I'll do it! I will," he said, but Nathan was wise to the thinly veiled bluff.

He took another step forward, holding his dagger by the blade close to his side. The brigand grunted nervously and brandished his weapon at Nathan.

"Get back!" His voice cracked.

In one motion, Nathan lunged and flung the dagger at the man. It happened so quickly, the senator couldn't understand why the brigand had suddenly dropped his blade, but he didn't waste the moment and ran to Nathan's side. The brigand—with the dagger lodged deep into his eye socket—fell to his knees and collapsed, twitching sporadically.

"Thank you," the senator sputtered, holding a hand to his throat where the blade had been held.

Nathan nudged the body over with a foot and pulled his dagger free. The scuffle in the forest ended abruptly, but he wasn't sure which side had won.

"Stay here. Stay hidden," he whispered to the senator, then rushed outside.

Rounding the corner of the tent, he nearly impaled himself on a sword. Laird thrust at him, but Nathan managed to backpedal out of harm's way.

"It's me, sir!" Nathan yelled.

"Gods, sorry. Is the senator safe?"

"Yes. Are you guys okay? Is Sid okay?"

"Three ambushed us, but they're dead now. Aye, everyone's fine."

"Actually, not everyone, sir," Nathan said with a grimace, pointing to the guard's body sprawled in the mud.

Laird cursed under his breath. The other men and Brohm arrived moments later.

"Brody's dead?" one of them asked, and then angrily turned to Brohm. "How'd you let this happen?"

"Is it safe to come out now?" the senator asked meekly from within the tent.

Laird pulled back the flap. "Yes, senator. The threat's been taken care of."

The old man gawked at each of them until he found Nathan. "This man will be commended for his actions. I've never seen such skill and precision with a dagger before."

Nathan held up his hands. "Uhm, no. That won't be necessary. Everyone here did their part to protect you. I was just doing my job."

"Of course, but your direct actions saved my life—"

"Let's just take it easy," Laird said, motioning for the old man to enter the tent again.

Nathan could feel the eyes of the guards—the senator's own men—bore into him.

"Trying to steal all the glory, eh?" one of them said.

Brohm stepped forward. "Hey! You know it's not like that—"

"Shut up! He's dead, no thanks to you."

Nathan opened his mouth to speak, but not wanting to cause any more strife, decided to remain silent. Trying to reason with them—to explain the details right now—was pointless. He was proud to witness Brohm holding his anger in check. The last thing they needed was another fight.

He and Brohm discreetly retreated to the forest camp, allowing the guards to mourn the loss of their comrade. The area was a mess, the scuffle having turned everything to mud. Three bodies lay where they fell, and Nathan kicked the closest one. Brohm pulled him close and held his head against his wide chest.

"Those guys are gonna be pissed at me the rest of the way," Nathan said, "and I can't blame them for it."

"I know. But we're almost there, and then we'll be done with this."

Nathan let out a heavy sigh. "Help me with the bodies."

They carried them farther into the forest, dumping them into a heap. After returning to camp, they came upon the three guards and the carriage rider. In the centre lay the dead man, wrapped tightly in a blanket.

"Laird wants to talk to you guys," one of them said.

Nathan and Brohm silently walked past the solemn group, and found Laird standing on the road, away from the tent.

"We have a new job," he said. "The remaining guards will see that the senator reaches Aylesbury safely. We're going to take Brody's body to his family so he can have a proper burial."

"Where's that, sir?" Brohm asked.

"Farther north. Larester. We're leaving now."

Nathan glanced up at the sky again, surprised to find a deep azure hue overtaking the inky night. By the time they'd packed their belongings and secured the body on a horse, there was enough light to travel the road safely. None of the men spoke or waved farewell as they left. Instead, they presented glowers of contempt. Nathan was glad to be rid of them, even if it meant travelling with a slowly decomposing corpse.

* * *

Not having to contend with a sluggish carriage made for swift and smooth

travel. Not an hour had passed before they arrived at a split in the road. Aylesbury, their original destination, lay to the west. They continued north along the wooded road, seeing the inn Brohm had mentioned the day before. Nathan glanced at it longingly as they rushed past, wishing he could rest his weary head until the next morning.

The autumn air remained crisp over the course of the day, cooling considerably as nightfall came. The three men set up camp in a small clearing, and taciturnly ate a meal of hardtack and jerky. After enjoying Randy's talented campfire cooking, the field rations brought them no satisfaction. Given the previous long night they'd endured, none could muster the energy to even consider standing watch. They risked sleeping with weapons in hand. Luck held them in its hand, however, and the night passed without interruption.

By midafternoon the next day, they reached the road west to Larester. Wanting to rid themselves of their cargo as quickly as possible, they decided to ride through the night. The prospect of a hot meal and a long sleep was the only thing that kept Nathan going. By sunup, the three men were relieved to see the port town on the horizon.

"You know where we're going, sir?" Nathan asked.

"Aye. One of the men gave me details."

They dodged their way through the bustling streets, their noses assailed by the stink of fish the deeper they went. Laird led them down a narrow alleyway, halting at a small, simple home.

"You two untie the body. I'll see to the wife."

He knocked on the door. It opened, revealing a young boy. Mouth agape, the child stared up at the imposing, stout man. Laird dropped to a knee and offered the friendliest smile he could muster through his thick beard.

"Hello, little master. Is your mommy home?"

The boy blinked and swallowed before finally nodding.

"Can you fetch her, please?"

Footsteps approached. "Hello? Who is it?"

A woman opened the door wider to greet Laird. Another child followed behind her, tugging on her apron. Laird suddenly lost his voice. He glanced back to Nathan and Brohm momentarily, glassy-eyed, before looking to the ground.

"Ma'am. My name is Laird. I'm with the Adventurer's Guild—"

"What's this about?" she asked, trying to identify what they were untying from the horse.

"We were travelling with a contingent of guardsmen. One of them was your husband, Brody."

"Oh gods, Brody. Is he okay? Is he . . ."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. He—"

She pushed him aside and ran to Brohm as he lifted the blanket-wrapped body from the horse.

"No. Please, no."

Standing awkwardly with the body in his arms, Brohm was unsure what to do. Tears streamed down the woman's cheek as she drew near. After a long moment of hesitation, she pulled at the blanket to unveil Brody's grey face. The woman collapsed to a heap in the dirt, uttering a heart-wrenching wail of despair. The two children tried to run to her, but Laird held them back and brought them inside. Nathan knelt by the woman's side, offering a hand to help her up. With unsteady feet, they stepped into the house. Brohm entered last and laid the body on the floor. Nathan could hear Laird speaking with the children in the other room, trying his best to keep them occupied.

After managing to stifle her sobs, the woman asked, "how did this happen?"

"Brigands, ma'am. They attacked in the night," Nathan replied.

"Did they escape?"

"No, ma'am. They paid for what they did."

She nodded and wiped her nose. Her lips twitched. It wasn't a smile, but a kind of consolation to know swift justice was served.

"Thank you for bringing my Brody home," she managed to say before breaking down in tears again.

Nathan held her. It seemed a poor substitute for comfort, but it was the best he could offer.

* * *

They stayed with the woman for another hour, offering condolences as best they could. After she seemed well enough, they said their goodbyes and reservedly departed. A sombre cloud followed in their wake as they mounted their horses and rode out. Their exhaustion didn't help matters. They stopped at the first inn they came across, entered, and ate a late breakfast.

"We'll head back to Croydon tomorrow morning," Laird said, finally breaking the silence between the men.

Nathan groaned inwardly. The prospect of travelling all that way didn't appeal to him in the least, especially being so close to Millsfield, where he and Brohm had their rented apartment. He just wanted to sleep in their own bed. Instead, they'd be on horseback for at least another five days. Brohm, eyes half-open and staring into space, shovelled food into his mouth. Nathan doubted he'd even heard Laird speak.

After finishing their meal, they headed upstairs. Laird, seeing they were entering the same room, called out to them.

"If you're light on coin, just say so. You don't need to share a room."

"I sleep better with the big lug at my side, sir," Nathan said.

Laird's face flushed red. "Oh, uhm . . . okay. You have a good night,

boys." He entered his room wearing a bemused smile.

Nathan scoffed and shut the door, finding Brohm attempting to remove his clothes. He was slumped over, trapped with one arm stuck in his shirt. Nathan felt the same way—physically and emotionally drained. They managed to help each other out, stripped naked, and flopped into bed.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was dark. Muted music floated from downstairs, accompanied by boisterous laughter. He rose to open the window, letting in a cool breeze. The reek of fish wasn't nearly as cloying as before. Perhaps he was just growing accustomed to the smell.

After standing in the night air for a few minutes, he slipped back into bed beside Brohm. The big man was dead asleep, snoring lightly. Nathan felt a smile creep across his face as he watched him sleep, and he gently kissed his forehead before closing his eyes again.

He woke again some time in the night. The din from downstairs was barely audible. Brohm had woken at some point and wrapped a large arm around Nathan, holding him close. Despite the fact Nathan was too hot, he didn't care. He always revelled in Brohm's embrace.

The next morning, they headed downstairs to the common area, famished. Laird beckoned them over to his table.

"We'll head out after we finish up here," he said with a mouth full of eggs.

"Have you thought about we talked about earlier, sir?" Brohm asked.

Laird stared at him a moment, trying to figure out what he was referring to. "Oh. You mean the lies you fed me and Shaw?"

Brohm winced and nodded.

"I still haven't made a decision what to tell him, if that's what you mean."

"I don't suppose there's anything else we can say to sway you?" Nathan asked.

"Oh-ho! Careful, boy. You're already on thin ice."

After they ate and purchased provisions for the trip, they headed east back to Croydon. The excursion was a sullen one. Neither Nathan nor Brohm tried to reason with Laird again, nor did they go out of their way to make small talk. More than once, Nathan strongly considered cutting their losses and leaving. He knew Brohm would follow him without question, given he hadn't been keen upon discovering the requirement to prove themselves to the guild. Ultimately, he decided to see it through to the end. They were so close to finding out if they'd be accepted into the guild. But would Laird keep their story a secret? The lie covering a lie. Nathan shook his head at their foolishness. They'd been given the gift to start their lives over, and a chance to redeem their true past, but it seemed like they were ruining that gift in record time. No matter what they did, they always fell back on their old, deceitful ways. He wondered if they could ever move on without their web of lies holding them down.

Chapter Two

After nearly a week on the road, laying eyes on Croydon cresting the horizon was a welcome sight. The ride back took them on an alternate route that broke through deep forests. The road was safer and regularly patrolled, but slower to traverse. Roadside inns were cleverly positioned to welcome weary travellers after a day's ride, but the three men were tired all the same.

Early afternoon sun broke through the clouds, welcoming them as they reached the town centre. Laird took a direct route toward the guild headquarters, leading them to the stables.

"You reckon he's gonna keep our secret?" Brohm mumbled to Nathan out of earshot.

Nathan bit his lip, wanting so much to ask Laird that exact question, but knew it was pointless. Once the horses were stabled, Laird motioned for them to fall in line. He led them to the main office and approached the receptionist.

"Is Shaw in?"

"Yes, sir. He's—"

"I'll see myself in." The stout man turned to Nathan and Brohm. "You two wait here."

He knocked on Shaw's door and, without waiting for an acknowledgement, entered.

"I think that answers your question," Nathan said.

"This is never gonna work out. Reckon we should just leave."

Nathan shook his head. "We didn't waste over a fortnight just to walk out at the last moment."

The men sat down, awaiting their verdict. Laird's distinct voice travelled through the closed door, but it was muffled and unintelligible. His tone, however, was neutral, which Nathan found encouraging, but didn't want to give any false hope by speaking it aloud. After a short pause, the door opened, and Laird entered the reception room.

"I'm off, boys. Safe travels," he said while making no eye contact, his expression unreadable.

Nathan and Brohm, put off by his brisk demeanour, turned to watch him rush out the door. The two exchanged a glance. This didn't bode well.

Shaw, standing in the hallway to his office, cleared his throat to catch their attention. He beckoned them to enter, then sat behind his desk with their file open in front of him. The disappointed expression on his face spoke volumes.

"Laird said you're soldiers from the western steppes. Is this true?"

Nathan pleaded with outstretched hands. "Please, sir. If you'd just let us explain—"

"A yes or no will suffice."

Nathan sighed. “Yes.”

“Could you explain how we’re supposed to trust you if the first words out of your mouth were a lie?”

Both men fell silent. Nathan felt Brohm tense up, wanting to leave.

“I’m waiting for an answer,” Shaw said.

“Did Laird explain why we left?” Nathan asked. “Why we considered it important to hide the truth?”

“He did, and I can appreciate the circumstances for doing so.”

“We only meant well,” Brohm chimed in.

“That doesn’t make it right. That’s why I’m torn about making this decision. Any other time, I’d have you out on your asses. But Laird’s referral . . .” He scoffed and gave the two men an incredulous look. “I’ve known that man for over ten years. He always takes the new recruits on their first assignment. I use him because he’s a hard man. He’s cynical, impossible to impress, yet a good judge of character. In those ten years, I can count on one hand when he’s told me a recruit would quickly rise through the ranks. He’s never been wrong.”

Shaw closed their file and presented an unflinching stare.

“He said you were worth the risk, and keeping you on probation was a waste of time.”

Nathan’s jaw slackened.

“He also told me you personally saved Senator Corbett’s life, and that you’d be commended for it.”

It took a moment for Nathan to find his voice. “I was just doing my job, sir. I don’t need to be commended for that, and I’ll refuse it if he does.”

“Like the hells you will,” Shaw said. “If a member does well, it looks good for the guild. You’ll accept it, and with good grace.”

Brohm shifted in his seat. “So, uhm, we’re members?”

“You might have Laird’s trust, but you’ve yet to earn mine. That said, we desperately need a branch in Millsfield, and you two are the best chance we have to get it up and running.” He tapped a finger on their file, deliberating before he continued speaking. “So yes, you’re members. Welcome to the guild.”

The tone wasn’t congratulatory, but Nathan didn’t care. They were in, and he was determined to do right by it. Shaw held out a hand, and they each shook it in earnest.

“Just don’t make me regret this, alright?” Shaw added with a hint of a smile.

“We really appreciate this, sir,” Nathan said. “We won’t disappoint you.”

Shaw opened a side drawer and pulled out two signet pins, handing one to each of them. It was a simple turquoise gem with no insignia, matching the pin Shaw wore.

“You wear this at all times. It signifies you’re one of us, so if you see another wearing it, you can rely on them.”

Nathan and Brohm each secured the pin to their jerkin.

"That also means our members can rely on you," Shaw said. "Anytime, anywhere."

Brohm nodded. "Yuh, of course. You got it, boss."

Shaw sat down again. "So, do you have a location in mind for the new branch?"

"There's an abandoned inn just outside town that looked promising," Nathan said.

"Good. Once you've made a decision and secured the property, return here. By that time, the papers will have been drawn up to finalize the agreement."

They said their farewells, then left the office to push forward into the busy courtyard. Brohm wore his crooked grin—a special smile that always warmed Nathan's heart. He couldn't help smiling back. After days of worry and uncertainty behind them, he felt giddy excitement for what lay ahead.

Returning to the stables, they found Laird's horse gone. Nathan was disappointed to not have been able to thank their temporary boss. Perhaps that's why he ran off so abruptly. He knew Nathan would've wanted to thank him, and he seemed the type unable to comfortably receive gratitude.

"Reckon we celebrate with a lot of ale and a soft bed," Brohm said. "We'll head back to Millsfield tomorrow, yuh?"

"Sounds good. Lead the way, big guy."

* * *

Upon arriving in Millsfield, they returned to the dilapidated inn sitting beyond the western edge of town. Long, yellow grass surrounded the three-storey building, bordered by a giant veranda on three sides. A sign, The Fox and Hen, hung loosely above the nailed-shut front door. Wooden boards covered the windows, and Brohm yanked one free to peek inside. Aside from tables, chairs, and an intricate array of spiderwebs, there was little else to distinguish in the gloom.

In the backyard, they found an old well, its covered roof collapsed and fallen to one side. Beyond lay a field of grass. Trees stood proud in the distance, their leaves—bright yellow and red—just about to fall for the season. They bordered the grassland far to the left and right, holding everything in place. A grand ice-peaked mountain range overlooked all, a lone ward to protect them. Nathan couldn't help but stare in awe at the beauty before him.

He turned to find Brohm not enjoying the scenery, but instead staring at him quizzically.

"What?"

Brohm shrugged casually. “Nothin’. Just wondering what you’re smiling about.”

“It’s a beautiful view, don’t you think?” Nathan asked.

“Sure. Reckon it’s nice.”

His tone didn’t quite ring true, but Nathan didn’t think much of it. Not everyone could appreciate the rugged beauty of the world, and that was fine.

Back in town, they sought shop proprietors and barkeeps to ask if they knew the owner of the old inn. It was known to everyone, but none could produce the owner’s name or explain why it had been abandoned. It wasn’t until late that afternoon that a tavern patron overheard their conversation. The grizzled old man rose from his table and joined them at the bar.

“I think I can help ya, boys,” he said. “Why’re y’all interested in that place?”

“We’re aiming to buy it,” Brohm said.

The man smiled, his face toughened from years in the sun. “Oh yeah? I used to drink there. Lots of fun times.”

“Don’t get any ideas, Bill,” the barkeep said. “You’ve been a devoted customer a long time. I wouldn’t want to lose you now.”

Bill wheezed a laugh. “Don’t you worry. I wouldn’t leave ya.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference anyway,” Nathan said. “We’re planning on converting it into a guildhouse.”

“Which guild?” the barkeep asked. “No wait, let me guess. By the looks of you two, I’m thinking the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“We’re that obvious, are we?”

The barkeep gave him a knowing smile and waggled his eyebrows before leaving them for another customer.

“So, Bill, what can you tell us?” Nathan asked.

“My mouth is dry. Why don’t ya wet my tongue with another ale, and I’ll tell ya what I know.”

Nathan bought a round for the three of them. As soon as they were seated at the old man’s table, Brohm took a deep draught, emptying half his tankard.

“Thirsty too, are ya?” Bill asked.

“We’ve been walking around town all day. Yuh, I got a thirst. Glad to be rid of it.”

“So? Who owned the inn?” Nathan asked.

“His name was Ramsey.”

“*Was*?”

“Well, I haven’t seen him in years. Kinda assumed he passed.”

“Does he have any family?”

Bill shook his head. “Only a wife, but she got sick one winter. Didn’t make it.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Twenty years . . . maybe longer? Mind’s not what it used to be,” the old man said with a chuckle. “Anyway, after she died, poor Ramsey just wasn’t

the same. He used to be such a happy fella, but rare to see him smile after that. Wasn't long 'fore he shut the place down."

"That's when you lost track of him?" Brohm asked after finishing his ale.

"Nah, I saw him around town for a while, but then he disappeared. I heard he bought a tract of land north of here. We lost touch after that."

"Do you know how far north?" Nathan asked.

Bill shrugged. "All I know it was north of town. Given the mountains thataways, couldn't be far."

Brohm scratched at his chin in thought. "That helps, but not much to go on. You reckon anyone else might know more?"

The old man shook his head. "Nah, sorry. But I hope it was a fair trade for the ale."

Nathan stood and shook his hand. "You've been more than helpful. We appreciate it."

"Cheers."

The tavern had filled considerably since their arrival, and they shouldered their way through the crowd to the exit. Evening sun welcomed them, sitting low in the sky, accompanied by a cool breeze—a reminder of the coming winter season.

Brohm groaned. "My feet are killing me."

"If you're expecting a foot rub when he get home, you're gonna be *sorely* disappointed," Nathan said with a grin.

Brohm laughed and playfully punched his arm. The outburst caught the attention of a man standing across the street. His face, sombre at first, promptly shifted to fear. Wide owl eyes watched as they passed.

Brohm stopped to address him. "Can we help you?"

The man stood stunned a moment before shaking his head. Nathan assumed him a beggar.

"Anyone ever tell you it's not nice to stare?" Brohm asked.

The beggar took his question to heart and slunk into the shadows of a nearby alley.

"That was strange," Nathan said.

"Yuh. I wonder what his problem was?"

* * *

The next morning, they rode north out of town on a narrow farmer's road. Workmen tended the orderly fields, collecting the last of the year's harvest. Nathan slowed his mount as they approached one of them.

"Morning," the man said as he rose from the field, brushing dirt from his trousers.

"Hi. I was wondering if you knew how far this road went?" Nathan asked.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he scanned the northern horizon. “It continues on past the fields, but I don’t rightly know if it leads anywhere. Why do you ask?”

“We’re looking for someone. An innkeeper named Ramsey. We were told he might live up there.”

The worker shrugged. “I’ve never seen anyone coming from that direction. Don’t know any Ramsey, either.”

“Thanks for the help all the same.”

“Aye,” he said with a nod and returned to his work.

After a short ride, the fields gave way to wild brush and sparse trees. As the worker said, the road continued onward, but it was a neglected path overgrown with vegetation. Beyond lay the vast mountain range. While still distant, it loomed large and proud on the horizon.

The farther they rode on the path, the harder it was to follow. Brohm caught sight of a small building in the distance amid the brush, and they urged their horses onward. The wooden shack was worse for wear. It leaned to one side precariously, and appeared to be abandoned.

“Reckon whoever lived here is gone,” Brohm said.

Before Nathan could reply, a clucking chicken interrupted him. They investigated the backyard to find a coop of hens and an empty pen nearby.

“Someone must be living here,” Nathan said. “The chickens wouldn’t last long without being fed. There’s a small garden over there, too. Looks well-tended.”

Brohm turned his attention back to the shack. “Hullo? Anyone home?”

Nobody answered. Nathan returned to the front to knock on a ramshackle door. Still no answer. Brohm joined his side.

“Wanna take a peek inside?” he asked.

Nathan shrugged. “Someone clearly lives here. We should wait until they return.”

“You wait here, then. I’ll just be a second.”

Nathan protested, but Brohm waved him off and pushed on the door. It opened with a soft creak. He tentatively poked his head in before stepping inside and disappearing from view. Only a moment passed before a solid war cry broke the silence, followed by a grunt of surprise from Brohm. Nathan rushed in to find a man swinging an axe at Brohm, who was successfully dodging the attacks. After the third swing, Brohm grabbed the haft and yanked it from the man’s grip. The attacker stood his ground despite Brohm towering over him.

“Get out of my home!” the man roared.

Brohm backpedaled, nearly tripping over Nathan, and they stumbled out of the shack together. The man followed them out, allowing Nathan a good look at him. Despite his advanced age, he was sturdily built.

“What right do you have entering someone’s home without permission?”

“Sorry. We didn’t know you were in there,” Brohm said.

"That doesn't give you permission!"

Nathan stepped between the two men, raising his hands in a show of peace. "We apologize. We meant no harm. But why didn't you answer when we called out?"

"Maybe I don't want visitors. Look around you. What do you see?"

Nathan and Brohm glanced about, but didn't know what response he was looking for.

"There's nothing, nobody," the man said. "That's the way I like it. Now, give me my axe and shove off!"

Brohm tossed the axe to the man's feet.

"Wait," Nathan said. "We came out here for a reason. We're looking for Ramsey, the owner of The Fox and Hen. Are you him?"

For a moment, his eyes softened before the anger returned. "Who's asking?"

"I'm Whitter," Nathan said. "This is Sid. We'd like to buy the property."

"W-what?"

"You *are* Ramsey, right?" Nathan asked.

The man's eyes shifted between the two of them. He nodded.

"Listen, we heard your story. About what happened to your . . ." Nathan considered saying the word *wife* was a bad choice. "I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*?" Equal parts anger and sorrow dripped from Ramsey's voice. "Sorry for what? You don't even know me."

"True, but it doesn't mean I don't understand your pain. I've had loss, too."

"Just leave!" Ramsey cried and staggered backward, using the doorway for support, as though the crushing memory of his wife still weighed him down after all these years.

"Will you consider our offer—"

"Fuck off!"

The door slammed shut.

Brohm laid a hand on Nathan's shoulder. "C'mon, let's go."

They returned to their horses and watched them crop grass, seemingly oblivious to the outburst that just occurred.

"So what you reckon?" Brohm asked. "Find another place for the guildhouse?"

Nathan shook his head. "I'm not ready to give up that easily."

Despite their failed meeting with Ramsey, they were happy to know he was still alive. The trek to and from his shack wasn't far from town, and they arrived in time for lunch. Without needing to speak a word, they headed to their favourite pub, the Green Barrel. The fare was good, and the atmosphere appealed to both of them. While Brohm shovelled food into his mouth, Nathan pondered how to proceed.

"When we try again, we should bring something, like a peace offering."

Brohm grunted in agreement. "Reckon we wait a couple of days, though.

Gods, was he angry," he managed to say with a mouthful. "In the animal pen, he didn't have any pigs. We could bring him one. They're tasty, from snout to hoof."

To illustrate his point, he cut a chunk of ham from his plate and shoved it in his mouth. Nathan couldn't help but chuckle. Most would find Brohm's table manners appalling, but Nathan found his boorish ways endearing.

After their meal, they headed back to their apartment, catching a glimpse of the beggar again. As before, intense eyes watched them pass, but this time he was careful not to stare for too long. Regardless, Brohm wasn't pleased at the attention, and stopped his horse to shoot him a murderous glare. The beggar withered against his gaze.

"I see the truth of you," the man said.

"What in hells does that mean? What truth?" Brohm asked.

Nathan turned his mount to look back. "Leave him be. Come on, let's go."

Brohm grumbled under his breath and left the strange man behind.

Arriving at their apartment, they found a scroll laying at the foot of their door. Brohm unfurled it and read as they entered. A laugh escaped his lips.

"Guess what this is?" he sang in a mocking tone.

Nathan stood bemused at Brohm's singsong. "What. Tell me."

"It's something you don't want," the big man continued with a toothy grin.

Brohm held the scroll over his head as Nathan reached for it. The height advantage forced him to jump in an attempt to grab it.

"What is it?" he cried, hanging off Brohm's arm in an effort to lower it.

Brohm finally handed it over, belting out a hearty laugh. "It's that commendation from Senator Corbett. You have to go to some party."

"What?" Nathan scanned the document in distress. "Oh gods, why me?"

"Reckon you'll have to dress up all pretty, and talk to snooty-types. I'm sure you'll *love* it." Brohm's words dripped with sarcasm.

"Wait!" Nathan pointed at a section of the scroll. "It says here to bring a guest. You're coming with me!"

"Oh, no no no. No chance, l'il buddy. I'll join you to Croydon, but I won't go to any party like that. Reckon you're on your own there."

"Come on, Brohm. Please. I'm begging you."

The big man stood firm with a cheeky smile, shaking his head with closed eyes. Nathan sighed in dismay and slumped onto a chair, dropping the scroll on the side table.

"Gods. Why does this have to happen to me?"

Brohm's face grew sympathetic. "I was just foolin'. You really don't wanna go, huh?"

"I'm dreading it. I don't do mingling well."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to"—he sighed—"okay, I'll go with you."

Nathan glanced up. "Really?"

He smiled and nodded. "When is it?"

“It’s in a month.” Nathan stood up to hug him. “Thanks, big guy.”

Brohm kissed his forehead. “There’s just one thing you need to do for payment.”

“Anything.”

Brohm tugged at his belt and dropped his trousers. “How about a little relief?”

Nathan scoffed and gave him a sly grin. “Like you even need to ask.”

* * *

A few days later, Brohm acquired a pig for their second meeting with Ramsey, and managed to work a deal with the trader to borrow a small cart to carry it. Grey skies warned of rain as they rode north out of town, but they’d wasted enough time already, and decided to take their chances. The fields, teeming with workers just days earlier, stood bare now.

“Do you like autumn?” Nathan asked.

Brohm gave him a questioning glance. “Never thought about it. Why?”

Nathan shrugged. “There’s something I like about it. The change of scenery. The colours.”

“Yuh, but then everything looks dead. The days are darker.”

Nathan breathed in the earthy air. “Can’t explain it, but I find that strangely comforting.”

“Reckon the cooler weather’s always nice. Winter, too. Means I’m not sweaty all the time.”

“Winter’s are too cold for my liking.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll keep you warm,” Brohm said with a wink.

The idea of them cozying up in bed while a winter storm blew brought a smile to Nathan’s face. “I look forward to that.”

A gust of wind whipped by, bringing a few water drops with it. By the time they arrived at Ramsey’s shack, rain fell in violent sheets from strong winds. Brohm dismounted from his horse, splashing boots into mud, and hurried his way to the entrance.

“Ramsey,” he called out, knocking on the door. “It’s us again. We wanna chat about we talked about before.”

As Nathan drew closer, he peeked into one of the dirty windows and caught a glimpse of oil light inside. “He’s in there,” he said furtively.

They waited a moment before Brohm knocked again. It wasn’t aggressive, but he meant business. “We’ve brought a gift for you. We’re sorry about before.”

After a moment, the door opened a crack, and Ramsey’s face appeared. “I told you. I don’t want visitors.”

“Please, sir. Hear us out,” Nathan said. “We’ve got a pig for you.”

Ramsey glanced at the animal in the cart, then stared back at them. His mouth twitched as he considered what to do.

"You two look sorrier than a pile of wet manure," he said, opening the door wider and curtly ushered them inside.

They nodded their thanks and hurried inside to escape the cold rain. Their sodden cloaks dripped onto the floor, but Ramsey appeared unconcerned.

"Go on and hang your cloaks by the stove. Warm yourselves," he said.

While they did so, Ramsey grabbed a pipe from a nearby table and lit it. Tobacco smoke hung in the air of the small room.

"So, you two really want that land, eh?" he asked, casting a wary eye upon them.

"Yes. Name your price," Nathan said.

"I have no need for your coin."

It wasn't an answer Nathan was expecting, and he found himself lost for words. Brohm took the reins of the conversation.

"Reckon there's gotta be something we can give you in trade, yuh?"

"Actually, before I even agree to anything, tell me why you want the place so badly."

As Brohm explained their intentions, Ramsey's circumspect manner peeled away, layer by layer. Underneath revealed a man impressed by what he heard.

"Those adventurer folk were a loyal sort. Whenever they came through town, they always came to my inn. They had a rough edge to 'em, but still respectful, y'know?"

He pulled a long drag from his pipe, lost in thought.

"Fine. You can have it."

"What can we give in return?" Brohm asked.

Ramsey waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing. Just take it."

Nathan shook his head. "There must be something—"

"No. If you're with the guild, let it be my token of thanks for the many years of steady patronage."

"But you'll still take the pig, right?" Nathan asked.

"Oh, definitely. A fine gift, to be sure," Ramsey said before standing. "Let me find the deed to the property, and you can be on your way."

While he shuffled through a box of papers, Nathan and Brohm stared at each other incredulously at their luck. He returned after a moment with a tattered scroll and offered it to them. Nathan unfurled it, revealing what he assumed was a deed. The cursive script was nearly illegible. Rolling it up again, he carefully slid the parchment into an inside pocket. The last thing he wanted was for it to get wet in the storm.

"I hate to ask, but I need to know," Nathan said. "Why the change of heart? You wanted nothing to do with us last time we met."

Ramsey puffed on his pipe and shrugged. "I realized after you'd left I *might've* overreacted. Even though I didn't appreciate this big fellow in my

home without my permission."

Brohm scratched the back of his head. "Yuh. Sorry about that."

"Are you sure there's nothing else we can do for you?" Nathan asked.

"You can keep asking, and I'll keep saying no. Knowing that place will be working again gives me a kind of solace . . ."

He trailed off, eyes unfocused. Nathan and Brohm took that as their cue to leave and donned their soggy cloaks.

"We'll move the pig to the pen out back," Brohm said.

Ramsey broke free of his reverie and waved goodbye. "Much obliged."

Brohm opened the door, only to have rain spray across his face. "Reckon we can't get any wetter," he said with a chuckle and stepped into the storm.

They approached the cart, finding the pig squealing its displeasure about the downpour. Brohm led the horse hauling the cart to the pen behind the shack.

"Well, that was easy," he said.

"Yeah. A little too easy. I'm waiting for something to go wrong."

Brohm gave him a perturbed look. "Don't say that."

Using a stick as a prod, he managed to get the animal out of the cart and into the pen. Luckily, it was partially covered, and the pig took refuge from the rain.

Nathan mounted up, his soaked trousers riding up uncomfortably. "I've come to realize there's such a thing as *too wet*."

Brohm glanced at the sky but found no break in the clouds. "I hear that. Let's go."

After a change of clothes, Nathan and Brohm spent the remaining afternoon celebrating their good fortune at the Green Barrel. By the time dinner rush had arrived, they were deep into discussions on what to do next. Shaw had told them to return to Croydon once the property had been settled, but the idea of travelling all that way was an unattractive prospect. Instead, they decided to write to him with an update, explaining they would be travelling to Croydon to accept the senator's commendation. Both tasks could be dealt with in one trip.

As the night wore on, more patrons arrived, and soon the pub was filled with raucous songs and laughter. The two were mellow from hours of ale and food, and passively enjoyed the excitement from their dark corner.

One man, a burly fellow sitting at the bar, stood out from the crowd. He wallowed in his drink, completely oblivious to the festivities surrounding him. At first, a vague recollection passed over Nathan before returning as a wallop in the gut. It was Tarn.

"Brohm, look over there. The guy at the bar. Isn't that the guard from Helmsley Keep?"

The big man gazed over his raised tankard, his eyes attempting to focus. "I dunno," he mumbled.

Nathan continued to watch inconspicuously, waiting for the man to turn

his head to catch a better view of his face.

"I don't remember any guards from there," Brohm continued, slurring his words.

"He's the one I got the key from, remember?"

Nathan and Brohm had only just met at that point. Both were waiting to be hanged for crimes they committed, locked in opposite dungeon cells. Tarn, a guard Nathan had befriended, came to visit him. Nathan took advantage of the situation and attacked him through the bars of his cell, managing to grab the keys.

Once Nathan was free, Brohm pleaded to open his cell. Not wanting to have someone on his coattails, Nathan nearly decided against doing so. In hindsight, he would've been killed had he not freed Brohm. The big man had saved him from death more than once, and after everything they'd been through, the mere thought of not having him by his side felt alien to Nathan.

"Are you sure that's him?" Brohm asked.

Nathan finally caught a glimpse of the man as he turned to look at the crowd for a moment. Misery stained his features.

"Yeah, it's definitely him. We should go."

"Why?"

"He'll recognize us."

Brohm gave him a puzzled glance. "No, he won't."

It took a few seconds for Nathan to understand what he was talking about. Of course Tarn wouldn't recognize them. They were strangers to their own eyes.

He rubbed his face with tired hands. "Right. I forgot."

Brohm, smiling, hit Nathan's shoulder with a fist before returning to his drink. Nathan sipped from his own tankard, continuing to watch Tarn from the corner of his eye, but the man's woe soured his stomach. Either that or he'd had his fill of ale for the night.

"I'm heading home, okay?"

"Aww, no. Don't leave," Brohm said, pawing at him playfully.

"Sorry, big guy. I'm done in."

Brohm motioned toward Tarn. "Is it because of him?"

Nathan shrugged his shoulders.

"C'mon, I'll take you home," Brohm said.

"No, you stay."

"Nah. It's no fun without you."

They paid their tab and stumbled outside. Brohm was still steady on his feet, allowing Nathan to use him for support. But after a few paces of Nathan tripping over his own feet, Brohm had other ideas. Without a word, he picked Nathan up and slung him over his wide shoulder. Nathan's head swam, and he uttered an uneven moan.

"Don't you puke on me," Brohm said.

"I'll be okay . . . I think."

Brohm lumbered down the street with a hand conveniently on Nathan's backside to hold him. He gave it a subtle squeeze along with a throaty chuckle, and Nathan grunted his approval.

* * *

The following morning, Nathan and Brohm returned to the abandoned inn outside of town. They found the prospect that they now owned the property difficult to believe. Nathan cast a sidelong glance to Brohm, who returned a worried expression mirroring his own concern. Returning this inn to its stately presence would be a lot of work. Due to yesterday's storm, the once colourful treeline stood bare. In its place, skeletal limbs and branches reached for the sky. It did nothing to aid the dismal scene.

With a crowbar in hand, Brohm climbed the veranda and pulled boards free from the windows. Nathan did the same with his own crowbar, starting at the opposite end. After completing the first storey, they returned to the nailed front door and pulled it free. It swung open, hinges squealing in discontent.

Disturbed by the movement, dust motes rose into the air, forming soft shafts from sunlight streaming in. Layers of cobwebs and dirt coated every surface. The wooden floor squeaked with each step. At two storeys high, the common room took up the front half of the building. The space was fully furnished with tables and chairs, appearing to be in good condition despite the grime. Along the far wall was the bar. Beyond that, a swinging door held the kitchen and an office.

A staircase to their left led to door-lined hallways—what would have been rented rooms. They were furnished, however the bedding reeked of mould and would need to be replaced. The third floor was laid out differently. An open hall surrounded the landing, providing access to the remaining rooms. One door, however, was set apart from the others against the rear wall, beckoning them to reveal its secret. Beyond lay grandiose quarters, with a large four-poster bed acting as the centre of attention.

"Reckon this room'll be ours, yuh?" Brohm said.

Despite boards still covering the windows, peeking between the cracks granted the breathtaking view of the land and towering mountains beyond. Nathan's heart skipped a beat at the thought of calling this home, living with Brohm by his side.

"It's perfect."

Brohm nodded. "Just imagine how nice it'll be once we clean it up."

"All things considered, it's in better condition than I thought. The outside needs work, though."

"Yuh. Reckon the roof and outer walls need replacing. You know anything about that?"

Nathan shrugged. “Not enough to do it right. Probably be best to hire someone.”

They returned to Millsfield in search of a carpenter. After a few enquiries, they were pointed to a workshop and a man named Gareth.

“The Fox and Hen, you say? Aye, I could have a couple o’ lads to fix it up for you,” Gareth said.

“How soon could they get started?” Nathan asked. “We’d like to have it finished before the cold weather arrives.”

The carpenter thought for a moment. “I’d say within a few days.”

Discussion of fees followed. Nathan had no idea what the cost of labour and materials would be, but was surprised to find it within their budget. The mass of coins in their possession—currently hidden under the floorboards of their apartment—would be considered ill-gotten gain by some, and fair play by others. The witch, Morgana, had a price for the illusionary spell she cast on them. Deep below the ruins of Tornel Keep held an amulet she desired. The maze-like caverns also held another secret: a cache of forgotten gold coins. Without that capital, the possibility of them opening a guildhouse would’ve been zero.

Gareth said to return the next day, and the plans to repair the building would be solidified. The two shook his hand, then headed to the Green Barrel for lunch. While they ate, they fell into deep conversation about their future together. The goal they strove for was truly within reach now, and despite the hard work ahead, neither man was dissuaded. Brohm’s excitement grew as their discussion continued, and Nathan found it infectious. The past few months had opened a world of possibilities to them, and the elation was foreign to him.

A heartbeat later, that excitement tumbled to the floor. The tavern door opened, and Tarn entered. Dark clouds followed the man, attracted by his sullen demeanour. Even though Brohm’s back was to the door, Nathan’s expression told him exactly what was happening. He cast a sidelong glance to find Tarn approaching. At first, it seemed he was heading straight for them, only to sit at a nearby table instead. Nathan and Brohm watched in silence as a server came to take his order. Just ale, of course. She returned with his drink and—to Nathan’s surprise—sat down at Tarn’s table.

“Everything okay, hon?” she asked Tarn. “Can’t say I’ve ever seen a smile on your face. What’s got you down?”

Tarn peered at her over the rim of his tankard with surprise—touched that anyone would ask about his problems. He set his drink on the table, considering how to start.

“I used to be a guard at Helmsley Keep. It was a good job. Good pay. I liked my commander and the other men I worked with.”

“What happened?” she asked.

He took another pull before continuing. “I let them down. I was a fool, taken advantage of by someone I thought was a dignitary. Turns out he was a

criminal. He escaped from the cells, and it was my fault."

The server reached out to touch his arm. "I'm sure it wasn't your fault—"

"It absolutely was. I wasn't even supposed to be down there, but I wanted to know why they'd locked him up. He attacked me, knocked me out, locked me in his own cell, and escaped. To make matters worse, he let another prisoner go. The madman killed five of ours to make it out."

She waited patiently as he drank again.

"They discharged me immediately. My reputation is ruined. I'll never be able to work as a guard again."

"Oh, hon. I'm sorry."

"It gets worse. Those two thugs teamed up once they got out. Helmsley was furious, and ordered search parties from a local garrison. Any trooper who came into contact with those men was always found dead. I don't understand how those two could've done all that. You might've seen the wanted posters around town with a ridiculous bounty. That's how badly he wanted them."

Tarn finished his ale. "I made one stupid mistake, and look what happened."

"Everyone makes mistakes."

"This mistake killed so many people. Most of them were husbands and fathers. I've ruined so many lives . . ."

Tears threatened to fall, but he roughly wiped them away.

"You make it sound like you killed them yourself. You can't think that."

"I can, and I do."

She took his empty tankard. "I'll get you another. My treat, okay?"

As she stood up, Tarn touched her arm. It took a moment for him to gather his thoughts before speaking.

"I just wanted to thank you for listening. It feels good to just get it out, y'know?"

She offered a warm smile. "I'll be back in a moment, hon."

Nathan drew a deep breath. None of Tarn's story was news to him, but hearing it spoken aloud from someone on the other side disturbed him.

"We really *are* the bad guys," he said grimly.

Brohm shrugged. "Sure, we did some bad stuff, but it was self-defence. Well, mostly."

"And what about before we met? How many people did you hurt or kill? I lost count a long time ago."

"Isn't that why we're doing this now with the guild? Changing our ways?"

Nathan reconsidered whether their future actions could truly redeem their past. He wanted to believe they could, but after hearing Tarn, he found it difficult. The server returned to Tarn with a full tankard, and the man thanked her. After drawing another deep breath, Nathan stood up and approached him. Brohm looked on, perplexed.

"Uh, hi," Nathan said. "Mind if I sit down a moment? I have a proposition

for you."

Tarn peered up from his drink to size Nathan up. He gave a wary nod, and Nathan took a seat.

"I apologize for eavesdropping, but my friend and I couldn't help but hear your story."

Nathan caught a glimpse of Brohm. The big man, wide-eyed, discreetly shook his head. Nathan ignored his warning.

"You look able-bodied, and we're looking to hire someone to help us fix up The Fox and Hen."

Tarn put down his drink. "I'm not familiar with it."

"It was an old tavern and inn to the west, just outside town. We're working to convert it to an Adventurer's Guildhouse."

Tarn appeared intrigued, nodding for him to continue.

"It sounded like you needed the work," Nathan said. "We'd be glad to take you on. It's simple work, really. Just helping us clean, and repair anything that needs it."

Tarn chuckled. "I'd say I'm better at repair work than cleaning, but if you'll have me, I'll take it," he said, extending his hand.

Nathan shook it. "Great. Come by the place in three days. We'll be working on it by then. As I said, it's just outside town, west of here. A three-storey rundown building. You can't miss it."

"I appreciate this. My name's Tarn. What's yours?"

Nathan faltered a moment. "Oh, I'm Wh-Whitter. We'll see you then."

Brohm, a shade too pale, rose from his seat and dropped some coins on the table.

"We should get going," he said as he passed by.

Nathan joined him, and the big man wrapped an arm around his shoulder, guiding him out the door. As soon as they passed the threshold, his grip tightened, and he led Nathan into an alleyway.

"Where are we going?" Nathan asked.

Brohm smashed him against a wall and held him there. Nathan tried to gasp, but the wallop had knocked the wind from his lungs. As he regained focus, he found Brohm's face filling his vision, eyes brimming with rage. He'd seen that look before, but only aimed at their enemies. Having it directed at him now was a terrifying experience.

"What in the hells are you doing?" Brohm roared.

Nathan could only blink in response.

"Of all the people you could hire, it had to be him? What if he finds out the truth about us?"

Nathan, recoiling from Brohm's gaze, managed to find his voice. "How could he?"

"You really want to risk everything? Why did you do that?"

"It . . . it was a gut reaction."

Brohm slammed him again. "That was a mistake. You're gonna fix it by

telling him he's not part of the team."

"No. I can't do that."

"You can, and you will!"

"Look at what I did to him. I ruined his life," Nathan cried. "We're trying to redeem ourselves, right? Trying to be good. Trying to do the right thing. If I can't help *him* . . ."

Brohm let out a heavy sigh and took a step back, but his face was still red. Nathan withered under his stare.

"Just let me help him," he pleaded. "Let him work for us, just to get the place fixed up. It'll be a month at most."

Brohm pointed a thick finger in Nathan's face. "If this goes bad, I'll be forced to fix it. So just remember whatever I do will be *your* fault."

"What does that mean?"

Brohm eyed him with a furrowed brow. "Don't be an idiot. You know exactly what it means."

Before Nathan could respond, Brohm stormed away, leaving him slumped against the wall. Waves of conflicting emotions screamed through his mind. Despite the short time he'd known Tarn, he'd felt a connection. Had it been possible, they could've become fast friends. But the fact he'd taken advantage of Tarn's good nature to escape the cell filled him with a guilt that shook him to the core.

Then, there was Brohm. Every day, his love for the man grew. It exceeded anything Nathan thought possible. Just to be with him filled him with such joy, and to be one with him was beyond words. Despair filled his belly knowing Brohm was angry with him now. He knew the anger would subside, but the pain was unbearable.

Why couldn't he simply do as Brohm asked? Was his need to clear his conscious more important than their safety? Was it more important than Brohm's life? Nathan fell to his knees in the dirty alleyway and wept. Either he didn't know the answer, or was too afraid to accept the truth.

* * *

Nathan spent long hours wandering the streets, aimless and lost in thought. He dreaded the prospect of returning to the apartment. As much as he wanted to do as Brohm asked, he couldn't. The idea of turning Tarn away after offering him a hint of hope felt impossible.

The evening chill forced him home just after sunset. He stood outside the door of their apartment for a moment to steel his resolve, then reluctantly opened the door. Warmth, fuelled by a dying fire, escaped outside. Flickering light threw long, stark shadows across the room. Brohm sat on a large upholstered chair, snoring softly. Padding his way to the hearth, Nathan added

a log and stoked it. The snoring stopped, and he glanced over to find Brohm watching him. Firelight reflected in his eyes, a reminder of their argument.

"Did you talk to him?" Brohm's voice was calmer, yet still held an edge that cut through Nathan.

"No. I'm sorry. I can't."

The big man let out a laboured sigh. "I can't believe you're doing this."

"I have to help him."

"Why? You say keep a low profile, and then you do this. It makes no sense."

"I don't expect you to understand."

Brohm rose from his chair and sat at Nathan's side by the fire. "Then help me understand."

"I ruined the man's life."

"And you reckon a month's pay is gonna make a difference?"

"It's more than the coin. Maybe it gives him some hope. Maybe he joins the guild and finds new purpose in life."

Brohm gave him a hard stare. "I wasn't kidding about my warning."

"I know, but please reconsider—"

"Fine. Have it your way. But if anyone threatens us? I end them. I don't give a shit if it's not the *right thing* to do."

Nathan's chest tightened at his words.

"Because you and me? That's what's important," Brohm said.

Tears stung Nathan's eyes, and he closed the distance between them for a hug. The big man stiffened at first, but soon returned the embrace.

"I love you, Brohm. I'm sorry."

"I know, but why you gotta be so stupid?"

Nathan laughed, causing a tear to stream down his cheek. Brohm thumbed it away.

"Thanks for caring about this stupid fool," Nathan said, his voice trembling.

"Somebody's gotta. Reckon it's me."

They sat together in silence, watching the fire until it died down to embers.

Chapter Three

Over the course of two days, Nathan and Brohm worked out the details with the carpenter, Gareth. On the morning of the third day, they arrived with cleaning supplies to find workers already raising scaffolding around the inn—soon to be their guildhouse. Gareth, acting as foreman, waved in greeting as they approached.

"You guys don't fool around," Nathan said. "We weren't expecting you'd start so early today."

"Aye. Well, you said you wanted to finish up before first snow. We've a lot of work ahead o' us."

"Don't let us get in your way. We'll be inside."

Gareth nodded and went back to supervising his crew while Nathan and Brohm ducked under the scaffolds to enter the building.

"Reckon we need a maid," Brohm stated as they stood in the large common area.

"A maid would run screaming from this place."

They both laughed, but their mirth ebbed away as they considered the work ahead of them. Voices outside caught Brohm's attention, and he peeked through a window.

"Looks like our *maid* has arrived."

Confused, Nathan joined him by the window. Tarn stood outside, greeting the crew.

"Be nice," Nathan said, ignoring Brohm's grumbling and opened the door.

Tarn joined them, astonished. "This place is huge."

"Ready to work?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah. Where do we start?"

Nathan glanced around and shrugged. "Here's as good a spot as any, I guess."

Tarn offered his hand to Brohm. "Hi, I'm Tarn. We've not met yet."

"Sid," Brohm said curtly, not accepting his hand, and then left them abruptly.

Tarn pulled his hand back to his chest and looked to Nathan. "Uh, did I say something wrong?"

Nathan painted a smile on his face. "No, don't worry about him. Everything's fine."

Refurbishing the main floor took the three men nearly a fortnight to complete. Dust, dirt, and cobwebs were swept out. Loose floorboards, of which there were many, were nailed down. Wooden tables, chairs, and the bar were refinished with the help of Gareth's expertise. The kitchen—still stocked with pots, pans, and utensils—was given a thorough scrubbing.

Tackling the second and third floors was a simple yet tedious affair. The amount of accumulated dirt and debris they removed was staggering. Opening the windows after so many years—bringing in crisp autumn air to flow through the building—helped to rid the rooms of their musty smell. New bedding arrived to replace the old. Candles were fitted into sconces and chandeliers, and oil lamps were filled. The many fireplaces were cleaned, and their chimneys swept.

Outside, Gareth's hardworking team completed ahead of schedule. They'd replaced the entire roof, fixed the outer walls where rot was forming, and finished with a coat of whitewash. That alone did wonders to bring the old place back to life.

After the mess of scaffolding came down one chilly afternoon, Nathan and Brohm, along with Gareth and his crew, were able to truly appreciate their work. The pristine building, however—surrounded by the unkempt vegetation—seemed out of place. Landscaping was something they'd consider in the spring.

"I trust you're happy?" Gareth asked Nathan.

"Absolutely. You guys did a great job."

The crewmen expressed their thanks, then continued loading carts with tools and scaffolding.

"It's okay to settle the bill tomorrow?" Nathan asked.

"That's fine. Come by the workshop any time."

Gareth tipped his hat, and then joined his men. The carts laden with equipment were secured to the team's horses, and they headed back into Millsfield. Once they were alone, Brohm nudged Nathan's shoulder.

"I got something to show you."

Nathan failed to decipher his sly expression. "What is it?"

"It's a surprise."

Taking Nathan's hand, he led him inside, and they ascended to the third floor. All the while, Nathan prodded for clues, but Brohm only returned the same playful look. Upon reaching the landing, Brohm ushered him toward the door of their future bedroom. From the beginning of their work restoring the building to its former glory, he'd been adamant Nathan not enter that room. Despite his curiosity, Nathan respected his wishes. Now, with his hand on the door latch, anticipation was at a fever pitch.

"Well, go on. Open it," Brohm said.

Nathan peeked his head in, and gawked at the sight before him. The dreary room he remembered was gone—now furnished with a large wardrobe, two dressers, and burgundy wall hangings. White curtains hung from the windows. An inviting fire crackled in the hearth, dispelling the cold. The wooden floors were sanded and refinished. Thick rugs surrounded the four-poster bed, with tables flanking each side. The welcoming nature of the room beckoned, and he stepped inside.

"You like it?" Brohm asked.

Nathan turned to face him. “Brohm, this is beautiful—”

“Just one rule,” he said, pointing at Nathan’s feet. “Boots off in the bedroom.”

Nathan grimaced and crept back to the chair conveniently placed beside the door, then sat down to remove his boots. Brohm did the same while Nathan approached the bed, running his hand over the crisp linen sheets. A mischievous laugh caused Nathan to turn, but before he could react, Brohm was upon him. The big man tackled him onto the bed, pinning him down. They kissed, deep and passionate.

“This is really ours,” Nathan said, more as confirmation to himself than a statement. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Nathan.”

Brohm moved in to kiss him again, but a knock at the door stopped him. Tarn stood at the threshold, averting his eyes.

“Sorry. I, um, didn’t mean to intrude. I finished cleaning up the office and was wondering what you wanted done next.”

Brohm awkwardly rolled off Nathan and sat on the edge of the bed, glaring at Tarn. Nathan, red-faced, padded over to the chair to don his boots again.

“That was our mistake. We should’ve closed the door.”

Tarn chuckled nervously, refusing to return Brohm’s gaze. “It’s no big deal.”

“There’s a few hours left, but why don’t we call it a day,” Nathan said, counting out coins from his pouch. “Here’s a full-day’s wage.”

He gave Nathan a puzzled glance. “Oh, okay.”

“I’ll see you out.”

They reached as far as the head of the staircase before Tarn turned to him with an inquisitive look.

“Sorry. I realize this isn’t my business, but I overheard him call you Nathan. What’s up with that?”

Nathan’s blood ran cold. He tried to swallow and nearly choked.

“It’s just a nickname.” Normally, producing a credible lie was no problem, but his natural cunning had failed him this time.

“Okay. I only ask because of that guy I mentioned—the one who escaped Helmsley Keep—his name was Nathan.”

“That’s a weird coincidence,” he replied, trying to look surprised.

“But I realize now you remind me of him.”

“What do you mean? Do I look like him?”

“No, but how you hold yourself, it seems familiar somehow.”

Nathan knew the conversation had to end and shrugged nonchalantly. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

Tarn—despite still being puzzled—accepted that, and they descended without another word. Reaching the front door, Nathan opened it. The afternoon sun struggled against dark oncoming clouds. An approaching storm.

“Listen, Tarn. I think we’ll be good from here on out. So, um, this’ll be your last day.”

“Oh . . . okay. Did I do something wrong?”

“No, your work was fine. We’re just trying to save coin where we can.”

Nathan offered his hand. Tarn shook it, giving him an unconvinced expression, but whatever was going through his head was left unspoken. Instead, he nodded toward the incoming weather.

“I should get going, then. It’s too cold to get caught in the rain. Thanks for the work.”

Nathan remained on the veranda, watching Tarn reach the road back into town until he disappeared over a small incline.

Heavy steps approached from behind. “Reckon it was only a matter of time,” Brohm said, an undercurrent of anger colouring his voice.

Nathan turned to him. “You heard?”

The big man nodded, his eyes lit afire again.

“Don’t worry,” Nathan added quickly, holding his hands up to assuage him. “I dealt with him. He’s gone. It’s done.”

If anything, that only kindled Brohm’s anger, and he grabbed him roughly by the back of the neck.

“What are you doing?” Nathan cried, failing to pull himself free.

Brohm held his face close, his voice deep with menace. “We’ve been lucky, you and me. Too lucky, I reckon. Doing stupid shit like this only uses it up.”

“Let go. You’re hurting me!”

The fire in Brohm’s eyes extinguished. He released his hold and took a timid step back. Nathan gingerly touched the red mark Brohm’s grip left on the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry, I . . . didn’t mean to hurt you,” Brohm mumbled.

“I get it. You’re angry, you lash out, but don’t aim it at me.”

Brohm stared at his feet. “I said I was sorry.”

Rain began to fall, and Brohm stepped off the veranda into the courtyard. “I’m gonna go back to the apartment. You can stay here tonight.”

Nathan followed after him, pulling his arm. The rain felt like ice on his skin. “No, don’t do that. You’ll get soaked.”

“Reckon I need to cool down.” He turned back and cupped his cheek. “I never meant to hurt you.”

Nathan touched his hand in response. “I know. You lose yourself when you’re angry.”

“Yuh. I don’t know why I’m that way.”

“Because it’s always protected you.”

Brohm shrugged and pulled his hand away. “I just need time to think, okay?” He lumbered away without waiting for a reply.

“I’ll come by in the morning? We’ll breakfast at the Barrel,” Nathan called out.

Brohm turned slightly to deliver a halfhearted nod before disappearing within the haze of falling rain.

* * *

Nathan managed to get some sleep, but it was hard-fought. He stared at the empty side of the bed. Brohm had put so much work into their bedroom, yet their inaugural night together was for nought.

The fire from last night had long died out. While he was comfortably warm beneath the covers, the air felt chilly. Pulling back the sheets brought an involuntary hiss from his lips. The room was freezing. He silently thanked Brohm for the rug surrounding the bed. It worked well to protect his feet from the cold while he dressed.

Narrow shafts of grey morning light streamed through an open gap in the curtain. He peeked outside to find the world washed clean with a layer of virgin snow. The forest in the distance contrasted against it, a sea of dark limbs and branches. From his high vantage point, he realized the treeline acted as a border to a ravine.

While heading toward Millsfield, wet snow squelched under his boots, bringing a smile to his face. The gloom he felt yesterday had drifted away. Tarn, and all the trouble his involvement brought, was behind them.

He reached the apartment and stepped inside. It was cold, but nowhere near as frigid as the guildhouse. The sitting room stood empty. He peered into the bedroom, finding Brohm still in bed, snoring softly. Not wanting to disturb him, Nathan closed the door and returned to the sitting room. In the corner, he nudged the edge of a wooden plank on the floor, and it tilted up to reveal their hidden store of coins. He refilled his purse, along with another leather pouch for Gareth's final payment. The cache was dwindling, but with the worst of their expenses paid, they would be able to live comfortably until the guildhouse earned them money.

The bedroom door opened, and Brohm padded toward him, naked, rubbing his eyes.

"You get much sleep?" he asked.

Nathan shook his head.

"Me neither. Took all night," Brohm said with a pout, and reached out for a hug.

Nathan closed the space between them, more than happy to be held in his arms. "I missed you."

"Yuh, me too. Come back to bed. Reckon we could use a few more hours."

"As enticing as that sounds, I want to pay Gareth. And I'm starving."

Brohm considered his words. "Let me get dressed."

Nathan playfully swatted his backside, eliciting a yelp followed by a throaty giggle. Watching him disappear back into the bedroom, Nathan was elated to find the unease between them had evaporated.

"Last night, I found the scroll from that senator guy," Brohm called out. "I'd forgotten about it."

With all their attention put toward refurbishing the guildhouse, the commendation had been pushed completely out of Nathan's mind.

"Gods! You're right."

He counted days on his fingers as he headed toward the bedroom. "I'll have to leave tomorrow to get there in time." He paused a moment, giving Brohm a desperate smile. "You're still gonna come with me, right?"

"Yuh, as long as there's lots of booze."

"I don't think it's that kind of party."

Brohm scoffed at the notion. "What you reckon we gonna wear? We don't have anything . . . nice."

"There's bound to be a tailor in town. Maybe someone at the Barrel can point us in the right direction?"

They bounded into the snow to Gareth's workshop. The carpenter, warming himself near an open fire, waved in greeting upon their arrival. Nathan handed him the leather pouch, and after a hasty coin count, Gareth thanked them for their business.

Their next stop was the Green Barrel to sate their hunger. As Nathan suspected, the proprietor provided a wealth of knowledge. Despite Millsfield being a small town, it still contained a modestly-sized district dedicated to those more well-off, and a tailor shop could be found there.

Nathan and Brohm found the tailor without a problem, and a bell rang as they entered. The clientele within, mostly women, turned their heads in disbelief at the sight before them—haughty whispers complaining about such rabble darkening their stoop.

A thin, sharp-dressed man appeared, dismay written on his face. "I apologize, sirs, but I'll have to ask you to leave."

Brohm leaned forward. "You're the tailor, yuh?"

"I'm the owner of this establishment."

"We're going to some fancy party, so we need to look good, and we need it today."

The man sneered at him. "I can guarantee you don't have the money to make such demands."

Nathan jingled the coinpouch hanging from his belt. "Oh, really?"

The tailor pursed his lips while he considered. "Very well, but follow me to the back room. Your current attire is bad for business."

Brohm rolled his eyes and nudged Nathan with an elbow. "You hear that? We're *bad* for business," he said brashly.

While unamused patrons looked on, the owner shushed him and led them to the rear of the shop. Compared to the storefront's clean and proper

displays, the rear was a disaster. Cloth bolts of every sort hung from worktables and low rafters. A few men and women glanced up from their work, surprised to see them. The owner rushed to one of the men working nearby.

"Willem, I have two customers here that require dress for a formal event. Today."

"But I'm in the middle of—"

"Now."

Willem huffed and shoved the garment he was working on to the back of the table.

"Thank you," the owner said. He turned to Nathan and Brohm. "I trust you will be happy with Willem's work."

That said, he swiftly left the room, leaving them with the tailor. Willem stood, appraising Nathan's stature.

"We should have something that will fit you after some minor alterations." Then he gazed at Brohm. "You, on the other hand . . ."

"What about me?"

"You're a big one, aren't you."

Brohm smirked, catching Nathan's eye. "So I've been told."

"We'll have to start from scratch for you."

"As long as it's done today," Brohm said with a shrug.

"I'd recommend a corset, as well."

Brohm gave the tailor an apprehensive look. "A what?"

"It's a slimming device to give you a more attractive shape."

"But . . . I like my shape," he replied, rubbing his belly.

Willem rolled his eyes. "Very well."

As promised, the tailor fitted Nathan with a tunic and wide belt, a doublet, and trousers made of finely threaded material.

Nathan pulled at his attire. "Is it supposed to be this tight?"

"Define *tight*," Willem said. "It's supposed to be a slim fit. You look good."

He motioned to a looking glass in the corner of the room. Nathan hesitated before gazing at the reflection. Before him stood the man he didn't recognize. He doubted he'd ever get used to it. Brohm's face—the other stranger—loomed over his shoulder, casting a troubled frown mirroring his own thoughts.

Willem caught their expressions. "Is it not pleasing to you?"

"Uh, no. I mean, yeah, it's fine. I guess. I'm just not used to seeing myself dressed in something so flamboyant."

"This is appropriate attire for a formal party."

Nathan tugged at the doublet. "I'll have to trust your judgement."

Willem turned his attention to Brohm. "For you, I see a long tunic with matching hose, and a sweeping cape with gold embroidery."

Brohm stood aghast. "I'm not wearing hose!"

“Please, sir. I’m working with the time we have.”

“He gets to wear trousers,” Brohm said, pointing to Nathan. “Why don’t I get trousers?”

“Because I won’t have enough time. Don’t fret. I have no doubt other guests will be wearing similar garments. You’ll look dashing.”

“Dashing? But hose is way too tight,” he said, subtly pointing at his crotch.

“It’ll be a long tunic, sir. Your, erm, manhood will be hidden from view.”

Nathan stifled a laugh. Brohm—mouth agape—was lost for words, and Willem took that as acceptance to proceed.

The afternoon passed at a glacial pace while the tailor worked, and candelabras were lit as the sun set. Nathan had nodded off some time afterward, only to be awakened by a hand on his shoulder. Brohm stood before him, fully dressed in his new finery. Nathan turned him toward the light.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but yeah, you look really good.”

Brohm’s face was flushed red. “You reckon?”

The tunic was a fine fit, greatly accentuating his barrel chest. Tan leather boots and a cape hid nearly all the hose—its thin fabric straining against Brohm’s thick, muscular legs. Nathan surreptitiously glanced around to find they had a moment of privacy, and with a mischievous grin, he lifted the front of Brohm’s tunic to gawk at the bulge hidden beneath. The big man swatted his hand away with an embarrassed scoff.

“You look quite handsome,” Nathan stated with a wink. “You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Brohm’s unsure demeanour eased away at the mention of looking handsome, and he quietly thanked him. They changed back into their old clothes, thanked Willem for his fine work and guidance, and then returned to the owner to pay for their new apparel. As Nathan expected, the cost was exorbitant, bordering on criminal, but he couldn’t blame them entirely. They’d entered the place brazenly and made extraordinary demands. The owner wrapped up their new purchase and hurried them outside, locking the door behind them as soon as it slammed shut.

* * *

They left for Croydon early the next morning, heading southeast toward Remich. The snow from the previous day had melted, and they were met with dreary, cold drizzle. By day’s end, they reached an inn near the western Helmsley Keep road. Being a traveller’s inn, it was small and run-down, and the food was awful, but neither of them cared. It was warm, and all they wanted to do before bed was sit by the roaring fire to dry out.

The second day proved to be better travelling weather. While chilly, the clouds were gone, and they managed to make good time, arriving in Remich before sunset. Nathan headed toward the Black Lamb Inn—his old haunt—without a thought, only to be stopped by Brohm once it came into view.

"You reckon it's a good idea to go in there?" he asked.

Nathan, once again, forgot no one would recognize them. And if they had, such as when Tarn caught on to his mannerisms, it could only end in trouble. He questioned why it was so difficult for him to realize his old life was forfeit.

"You think we should go somewhere else for the night?" Nathan asked.

"Yuh, it's not worth the risk."

Nathan nodded, and they headed to another tavern nearby. While it was just as rambunctious as the Black Lamb, it didn't feel the same. He recalled the last time he visited Griff—the owner of the Black Lamb—who had warned of troopers hunting him and Brohm, and suggested they leave town. What stuck in Nathan's head was the additional news he'd been given just before leaving. Griff told him that Danny, a longtime friend, had been murdered by arson. Nathan left the tavern in a dazed state. Had he known it would've been the last time he saw Griff, he would've at least said goodbye. Just another item to add to his list of regrets. There were so many.

Brohm rubbed Nathan's shoulder. "You okay, l'il buddy?" he yelled over the din.

Nathan blinked, bringing himself back to the raucous common room. They'd already finished dinner, and were drinking ales before retiring for the night.

"Just thinking about stuff."

"Like what?"

"Griff. Danny."

Brohm nodded sympathetically and then emptied his tankard. "I'm heading up. You coming?"

"Nah, I'm gonna stick around a while longer. I'll be up soon."

Brohm gave his shoulder another squeeze before disappearing into the crowd. Nathan waited a few minutes before slipping outside. The night was still young, and people milled about the streets, going about their business. He walked the short distance back to the Black Lamb, standing before the front door a moment before entering. Behind the bar stood his friend, Griff, chatting with a few patrons. It was nice just to see his face. Nathan knew he should leave, but instead he walked up to the bar and sat down.

Griff approached him with a grin. "What'll it be?"

"Uhh . . . an ale."

"You got it." He pulled a tankard from below the bar, filled it to the brim, and plopped it in front of Nathan. "Anything else?"

"Any news around town?"

"What kind of news you looking for?"

Nathan shrugged. "How're you doing? Everything okay?"

Griff gave him a queer look. “Do I know you?”

With shaky hands, Nathan pulled coins from his pocket and dumped them on the bar. “Take care of yourself, Griff. Goodbye.”

“Whoa, wait.”

Nathan was already halfway to the exit. He didn’t dare look back, and Griff’s voice was lost under the roar of the crowd. He nearly knocked someone over while rushing out the door. After a hurried apology, he made his way back to Brohm. The big man was in bed, but still awake.

“You’re out of breath. What’s going on?”

Nathan stripped naked and slipped into the warm bed with him.

“You okay?” Brohm asked.

Nathan snuggled up against his frame, and Brohm turned to take him into his arms, holding him close.

“In case I don’t say it enough, I love you. I’d be lost without you.” He could only whisper for fear of his voice cracking.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing happened. Just . . . I want you to know how much I appreciate you.”

Brohm squeezed him closer and kissed him. “Feeling’s mutual, l’il buddy.”

In Brohm’s warm embrace, Nathan felt the gloom in his heart seep away, soothing him to sleep.

* * *

Nathan was eager to leave Remich the next morning. Grey skies brought light flurries. It didn’t accumulate, but was enough to make everything slick. The road passed through dense forest, and fallen leaves crunched under their horses’ step. The same monotonous imagery continued through the next day, until the forest fell away to reveal the southern mountains. They finally arrived at Croydon around noontide.

After registering for a room at the guildhall and enjoying a warm meal, they entered the head office. Shaw was there, chatting with his receptionist. Upon seeing them, he appeared surprised.

“I was wondering when you two would finally show your faces again. I received your missive, but it was vague on timeframes.”

They shook hands, and he ushered them into his office.

“Sorry we couldn’t be more specific,” Nathan said. “We had no idea ourselves.”

“So, what news?”

“We think everything’s ready to proceed. We’ve fixed up the inn we spoke of. We just need staff now.”

“Of course. We’ll have that covered. Someone to run the front, a bookkeeper, cook, blacksmith—”

“A blacksmith?” Nathan asked. “There’s no place built for that.”

Shaw scoffed. “This is an Adventurer’s Guild. Our members will need repairs to their equipment.” He thought a moment. “Okay, when are you planning on heading back?”

“Tomorrow. Probably late morning.”

“Come by when you’re ready to go. I’ll have someone join you. He’ll act as foreman to build a smithy. You’ll need to pay for those additions, of course.”

Nathan envisioned their dwindling coin evaporating before his eyes. Shaw shuffled through a drawer of files, pulling one and laying it out on his desk.

“Here’s the contract. Fairly standard stuff. To reiterate the deal we offered: While you’ll be responsible for the guildhouse—repairs and the like—we’ll pay for your staff, as well as food and drink for you and our members. You’ll get a twenty-percent cut of any money earned from work completed through your job board. You’ll also be free to do any jobs yourself, receiving the usual fifty percent, plus twenty for being the owners. Once things settle into a routine, you’ll find the house will run itself.”

Brohm nodded to Nathan in approval. Shaw dipped a pen into an inkwell and handed it to them to sign. They did so, being careful to use their pseudonyms.

“Great,” Shaw said. “While we wait for the ink to dry, did you have any questions?”

“When can we expect the staff to arrive?” Nathan asked.

“We’ll be building your team from people around the region. We’ll send couriers with letters of notice. Once received, they’ll need to settle their affairs and make their way to your guildhouse. It could take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. Anything else you’re wondering about?”

Nathan shook his head. “I’m sure we’ll have more later, but for now, I think we’re good. Oh, and I’m sure you’ll be happy to know we’re accepting Senator Corbett’s commendation tonight at some party.”

“That’s excellent news. Remember, you’re acting on behalf of the guild, so play your role accordingly,” Shaw said with a wink while rolling up one of the copies of the contract for them to keep. They shook hands, and he escorted them to the reception area. “We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

* * *

Upon nightfall’s arrival, Nathan and Brohm stood before Senator Corbett’s estate dressed in their finery. Other guests arrived in clumps, pulled in by the sound of music and murmur of polite chatter. Willem the tailor was

right. Everyone was ridiculously dressed.

"Gods, I hate this," Nathan mumbled.

Brohm—a silly smile on his face—slapped him on the back. "Let's get a drink."

The uneasiness the big man felt about his attire had vanished. He stepped through the wide iron gate to the courtyard, making a point of waving his cape with a flourish. At any other time, Nathan would've burst out laughing at such a display, but his nervousness left him dumbly following behind with reluctance. They approached the doorman, who stared at them from the end of his nose.

"Invitation, please."

Nathan pulled the small note from his breast pocket and handed it over. The doorman gave it a cursory glance, then returned it, gesturing to enter. Inside, they were greeted by a grand foyer with tall ceilings. The space was filled with guests, spilling into adjoining parlour rooms, and a massive dining room further back. Nathan felt rooted on the spot, unsure what to do. Brohm grabbed his arm, leading them to the nearest waiter carrying a tray of drinks. He grabbed two delicate glasses of wine, handing one to Nathan.

"Drink up, l'il buddy," Brohm said, downing his wine and taking another before the waiter moved on.

Nathan did so, allowing himself the moment to enjoy the fine wine. Brohm pulled him again, deeper into the crowd, heading to the dining room. More waiters milled about, some carrying drink, others bite-sized morsels of food. Brohm sampled them all.

"This is actually pretty good. Try it," he said, pointing at some seafood delicacy.

It was clear Brohm's crass attitude was causing a scene, but everyone was too polite to act or say anything about it. Nathan couldn't help but smile inwardly. These people, even with all their supposed power, were like sheep. They were all show and no action. But he knew if Brohm kept it up, someone would finally do something about it, and that would be bad for the guild's image.

"Brohm, let's go over there."

"What, in the corner? Why?"

"You're attracting too much attention."

The big man glanced about as he wiped crumbs from his mouth. Many eyes were on him. He swished his cape again and sashayed to one of the round dining tables. Nathan reluctantly followed, nonplussed at Brohm's mock haughtiness. They sat in silence for a time, watching the guests mill about and titter on about trivial things. A waiter carrying drinks passed nearby, and Brohm flagged him down.

"Could you get us a bottle of whatever that is?"

The waiter bowed. "Of course, sir."

He returned promptly with a decanter of wine, and served them each a

glass.

"You can leave that here," Brohm said, pointing at the decanter.

"Very good, sir," the waiter said, and left them.

Brohm lifted the glass. "Reckon this'll do for a start."

Within the hour, Brohm—his face flushed—had drained a second decanter of wine. Nathan had drank his fill, and was feeling much more relaxed. A low bell tolled, quietening the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, dinner will be served. Please be seated," a voice called out.

Despite there being eight chairs at their table, Nathan was pleased no guests joined them. Though considering Brohm's earlier performance, he wasn't surprised. Their host—the senator Corbett—sat at the head table raised on a short platform, joined by a gaggle of self-important men and women. Servers carrying covered trays arrived, swiftly gliding in and placing them before each guest. Silver covers were lifted, revealing steaming platters before them. The aromas were heady and exotic.

"What is this?" Brohm whispered to Nathan, a hand over his nose.

Nathan examined it closer. It was a square meal, to be sure, but the look and texture of the meat was foreign to him, and he'd never seen the vegetables before. He cut a piece of meat and tentatively ate it while Brohm looked on. A bizarre combination of flavour overpowered his senses.

"I can't decide if I like it or not," Nathan mused.

Brohm tried a bite, and his face contorted into a series of questionable expressions. After swallowing, he drained his glass of wine. "Ugh. That's not for me."

Nathan chuckled and tried another bite. This time wasn't nearly as intense. "Give it another try," he said.

Brohm shook his head. "When we get outta here, let's go to a pub for some beef and a tasty loaf."

"You can do that. I'm actually enjoying this."

After the meal was complete and refreshments were served, Senator Corbett chimed his glass with a knife.

"I hope you're enjoying yourselves," he said. "I have an announcement to make. As you likely know, my work requires that I travel a fair amount, and given my stature, can be a target for thieves and ruffians. Of course, I have my personal guard as protection, but at the behest of my betters, I also hire additional men from the Adventurer's Guild."

A questionable murmur rose from his guests.

"Yes, yes. I know they don't have the best reputation, but I'd like to set the record straight. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be standing here today."

He paused for dramatic effect before continuing.

"Never before had I come so close to death. But a man with such deft skill with a dagger ended that threat in a blink of the eye. His name is Whitter, and I would ask him to stand and be seen."

Nathan, wide-eyed, remained rooted to his chair in a petrified state. Brohm nudged him, but Nathan remained in place, so he lifted Nathan's arm.

"He's right here, mister senator, sir," he bellowed out.

All eyes turned to their table, and Nathan shrank deeper into his chair.

"C'mon, l'il buddy," Brohm whispered with a giant smile on his face, urging him to stand.

Nathan took a deep breath and did so, offering a meek wave to Senator Corbett and the crowd.

"Ah, excellent," Corbett said. "Would you please come to the front here?"

"If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer not—"

"Please. I insist."

Nathan glanced at Brohm. The big man, rosy-cheeked, gave him a ridiculous wink. Nathan decided he was enjoying his discomfort far too much. With an inward groan, he made the short walk to the front table. It felt like an eternity. The eyes of every guest bore through him. All he wanted to do was bolt out of the dining room, out of the estate, and hide in a deep hole. Instead, he managed to join the senator and his favoured company at their table.

"Would you please tell my friends and colleagues what happened that night?" Corbett asked.

"I don't think that'd be appropriate, sir," Nathan said.

"Oh, don't be modest."

The senator may enjoy life at a higher station than Nathan, but he wasn't completely unmindful. Upon seeing Nathan's discomfort, he offered a subtle nod of understanding and took it upon himself to speak.

"Very well. I'll explain what happened. I was sleeping soundly in my tent, and then suddenly, a man had a wicked knife to my throat. His breath reeked of cheap ale, and he'd not bathed in some time. I thought I might be sick had I not been so frightened. Then Whitter appeared. To my amazement, he threw his dagger right at us, yet hit the man square in the eye. I don't know how he managed to aim so perfectly, but he did."

The crowd gasped, followed by astonished whispers. Corbett motioned for silence, then pulled a scroll from his jacket and unravelled it.

"Whitter, this is my commendation to you and the Adventurer's Guild for your stellar performance."

Nathan accepted it and shook his hand, and the audience burst to applause. Once it died down, Nathan suddenly found the courage to speak.

"Thank you for this, Senator Corbett. I do appreciate it, but as I said that night, I was only doing my job. There was another man who wasn't so fortunate—one of your personal guard—and I'd like to take this moment to say that although I didn't know him well, I could tell he meant a great deal to the men he worked with."

He turned to the crowd.

"His name was Brody. Let's not forget the sacrifice he made to protect you as well."

Everyone clapped again, but with a soft restraint to show respect.

"Whitter makes a good point," Corbett said. "It pains me to know he left behind a wife and two children, however rest assured that I've personally seen to the compensation for their great loss. Thank you again, Whitter. And to all my guests, continue to enjoy the food, wine, and song."

On that cue, the ensemble fell to playing music again, and the hubbub of chatter soon filled the room. Nathan shook hands with the senator again before returning to his table at the back of the room. Brohm was leaning back in his chair with hands behind his head, wearing a massive grin.

Nathan slumped back into his chair. "Gods, kill me now."

Brohm laughed. "What are you talking about? You were amazing up there!"

"You enjoyed that way too much."

"Yuh, reckon I did. Sorry, l'il buddy." Brohm rubbed his belly. "I'm starving for some real food, though. Think we can go?"

Nathan glanced around the room. All the attention was off them now. "I guess so. Let's slip out one of the side doors."

They rose from their seats and tried their best to casually make their exit, finding the elegant hallway empty. The din from the dining room slowly diminished as they reached the vast entryway.

"Hey!"

They turned toward the voice, and a guard caught up to them. His face was familiar, and it took a moment to realize he was one of the men from the expedition.

"Hi. Sorry, I don't remember your name," Nathan said.

"That doesn't matter. I just wanted to thank you for what you said in there about Brody."

"Oh, well—"

"And I wanted to apologize for what I said to you guys after what happened. I was out of line."

Brohm stepped up. "You guys lost your friend. You were angry. We get it."

The guard nodded gently. "I'll tell the other guys about this. I know it'll mean a lot." He held out his hand, and Nathan and Brohm accepted it. "Thanks again. Safe travels to the both of you."

As they passed the threshold of the front doors, Nathan felt a burden lifted from his shoulders. It wasn't until now he realized Brody's death had been hanging over him. He knew it hadn't been his fault, but somehow he felt responsible. He shook his head in wonder at how much he'd changed. Six months prior, such a thing would've never weighed him down. He couldn't decide if that was a bad thing or not.

"I'm proud of you," Brohm said, slapping Nathan's backside.

"What for?"

"That was a pretty great speech you gave, yuh?"

"I guess. I'm just glad this stupid thing is over with. C'mon, let's find a pub and get you some food."

Brohm rubbed his belly. "Now you're talking."

* * *

Late-morning sun shone into the spartan room, hitting Nathan's pale face. He licked his dry lips and covered his eyes with an arm, groaning. Whenever he drank to excess, he never knew when to stop. Now, he was paying for it. Nathan glanced over to find Brohm already up, eating breakfast on the bed. As usual, he was never affected by too much drink.

"Morning. I brought you some bacon, eggs, and toast. Eat up."

Nathan groaned again. "Not hungry."

"We're riding out. You gotta eat something."

He was right, of course. Nathan willed himself out of bed, planting his feet to steady himself before standing. He poured a glass of water from a pitcher and drained it. A basin sat nearby, and he filled it to wash his face. The cool water helped to bring his senses back.

"I might just survive this," he said with a rough voice.

Brohm chuckled. "The price to pay for a fun night."

Nathan blinked, attempting to recall it, but only came back with a haze of memories. Judging by the sprawl of sheets barely covering the bed, it had clearly been a wild time. After eating as much as he could, they packed up and made their way back to Shaw's office.

"When you said late morning, I wasn't expecting you to arrive after noontide," Shaw said, a grin on his face.

"Yuh, sorry about that," Brohm said. "We had, uh, other errands to deal with."

Shaw rolled his eyes and waved his excuse away. "Don't take me for an idiot, boys. I can smell the booze from here." He stepped outside his office to speak to his receptionist. "Could you fetch Hobb for me?"

Shaw returned and gestured for Nathan and Brohm to sit down. "So, I don't know what you said last night at that gathering, but word is getting around. You impressed a great deal of important people."

Nathan's face reddened. "It was nothing."

"It's not nothing. We've already had two clients in this morning, singing your praises. One woman was upset to hear she couldn't hire you personally, but didn't stop her from recruiting some of our men. Good work."

Brohm nudged Nathan and gave him a grin. "Nice one, l'il buddy."

Shaw continued. "I was just finishing up the transfer orders for your crew. I'll be sending them out today. I won't deny saying I'm looking forward to having your branch up and running. Seems Laird was right about you two."

“We don’t plan to disappoint,” Brohm said proudly. “We’re excited, too.”

A heavy knock at the door took their attention.

“It’s open,” Shaw called out.

A man entered, easily taller and heavier than Brohm, but the extra weight was pure muscle. Black soot marred his face and clothes. Nathan couldn’t help but take him in with wide eyes.

“Hobb, meet Whitter and Sid,” Shaw said.

The man turned to them and offered a curt nod. “Hey.”

“Hobb here will act as foreman to build your smithy. Are you ready to go?” Shaw asked.

Hobb sighed. “I told you. I can’t just up an’ leave. I gots orders to fill. I need time t’ get things organized.”

“That’s why you have your team.”

“Sure, but I can’t expec’em to fill me shoes without notice. Gimme a week.”

“A week? No, that won’t do.”

Nathan, tearing his view from the man, gestured to placate Shaw. “Even if the smithy isn’t ready by the time the branch opens, I can’t expect it’ll be required right away.”

Hobb nodded to Nathan. “Y’see? It’ll be fine.”

Shaw tapped a finger to his chin. “I suppose it will be slow to start.”

“Yuh, and there’s a blacksmith in town anyway,” Brohm said. “If someone needs work done, reckon they can deal with him.”

Shaw shrugged. “It’s not the way I wanted it, but I guess I don’t have a choice. Very well.”

“Good,” Hobb said, before turning to Nathan and Brohm. “You’re in Millsfield, right? Gimme a fortnight to get there. You got a place for me and my crew to sleep?”

“Yuh, the guildhouse is ready,” Brohm said.

“Alright, I’ll see you then,” Hobb said, extending a massive hand.

Nathan accepted it, cringing as his hand audibly cracked in the man’s grip. Brohm was next. By his expression, he enjoyed the silent contest of strength, but the victor was clear as Brohm shook feeling back into his hand.

* * *

A cold weather front descended upon them as they travelled back to Millsfield, and an accumulation of snow slowed them down. What should have taken a week became ten days, and Hobb’s promise of arriving within a fortnight seemed doubtful. By the time they arrived, it was early evening. Both were looking forward to a hot meal at the Green Barrel.

They stomped snow from their boots and shook their cloaks at the door.

Soon, they were seated at their usual table, enjoying a hearty meal of steak and potatoes and washing it down with ale. It was times like this that brought a smile to Nathan's face. Enjoying a good meal with a friend, and appreciating the warmth of a roaring fire after so many days of travelling in the cold.

Then Tarn entered.

Nathan watched him from the corner of his eye, hoping he wouldn't detect them sitting in their usual corner. He nudged Brohm and gestured at the new arrival.

"I saw," Brohm mumbled under his breath.

Tarn navigated through the throng of patrons at the bar, but upon catching sight of them, steered toward their table.

"We have to talk," he said grimly. "Can I sit down?"

Nathan gestured to the empty chair at their table.

"Where've you guys been? I've been looking for you," Tarn said.

"Out of town on guild matters," Nathan said. "What's up?"

"Nathan . . . I know it's you."

A cold shiver ran down Nathan's spine, but he held a straight face.

Tarn continued. "The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was you the entire time. I can't explain why you look different, though." He pointed at Brohm. "I can't prove it, but I'm pretty sure you're the other guy they've been looking for."

Brohm glared at him with a furrowed brow. "What in the hells are you talking about?"

"The wanted posters that've been around since late summer. The one with a huge bounty for two men?"

Brohm shrugged his shoulders.

"I got in contact with some of my old buddies. Did some digging. Nobody knows your name—bad record-keeping—but you fit the description. Large build."

Nathan leaned forward. "I can see a few others in this tavern who fit that description. I don't know who you think we are, but it's dangerous to toss such accusations."

Tarn either wasn't swayed by his threat, or didn't catch it. "I'll figure it out. Find proof somehow—"

"Tarn," Nathan said. "We're just two guys trying to open a new guildhouse. You've mixed us up with someone else. Just drop it."

The man considered his plea a moment before shaking his head. "I know the truth, Nathan. I know it's you—"

"Does it really make sense for two escaped fugitives to be out in the open like this?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Exactly. How else can I prove we're not the guys from that wanted poster? We don't even look like them."

Tarn's resolve began to falter, and he fell to a loss for words. Nathan sat back in his chair, catching a sidelong glance from Brohm. The big man wasn't happy, and Nathan feared what he'd do after the conversation was over. He wanted to save Tarn from the fire in Brohm's eyes. He had to.

"Tarn, just forget all this, okay? Please. If you dig any deeper, you're just gonna cause harm to two innocent guys. I swear, we're not the guys from those posters."

Tarn let out a heavy sigh. "I was so sure." He stood up, almost embarrassed. "I don't know what to think anymore. I'm sorry . . ." he trailed off, leaving them.

Nathan held his breath as he watched him sit at the bar to order a drink.

"He has to go," Brohm said under his breath.

"No. Let's leave him alone, alright?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"He's not going to cause any trouble."

Brohm shot a thumb over his shoulder. "That's what you said last time."

Despite the noise of the crowd, Nathan leaned over to whisper. "We can't kill him just because of this."

"Damn right we can," Brohm hissed back. "I told you before. You knew the risk."

"But we're supposed to be the *good* guys, remember? We can't just go killing—"

"Listen, I agree with you. I don't wanna kill this guy either, but if he decides to change his mind *again* and start digging . . . he's gotta go."

Nathan stared at the floor and shook his head with regret.

"Come on," Brohm said.

He tossed some coins on the table, then grabbed Nathan's arm, forcing him to stand. Outside, snow was falling in earnest, blowing hard in the wind. The night was dark, and the few lamps hanging from posts did little to light the street. Nathan pulled up his hood and watched Brohm survey the area.

"This way," he said, pulling Nathan across the street to an alleyway.

Once they were hidden, he dug under Nathan's cloak and pulled his dagger free.

"What are you doing?" Nathan asked.

Brohm handed it to him, hilt first. "Take it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not doing your dirty work for you."

Nathan held up his hands. "I'm not going to kill him."

"This is your mess. You clean it up."

"No!"

Brohm dropped the dagger and grabbed Nathan. "Gods damn it, Nathan! Why did you have to get him involved?"

"I wanted to help him," Nathan said, struggling against him.

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't take the guilt, alright? I ruined the guy's life. I saw an opportunity to help him, and I had to take it. I *had* to."

Brohm let him go and leaned against the opposite wall of the narrow alleyway.

"We'll just keep an eye on him, okay?" Nathan said.

Brohm shook his head. "No. He dies tonight. By your hand. I don't care how, but reckon that dagger is the easiest way."

Nathan crouched to pick it up, wiping the snow from the blade. "I just want to give him a chance."

"He lost it when he spoke to us tonight. He's too close to knowing our secret. We can't risk anyone knowing the truth."

"Brohm, I'm begging you. Please—"

The big man rose up with bared teeth and grabbed Nathan, slamming him hard against the wall. The impact would've caused Nathan to sprawl into the snow, but Brohm's grip was firm. He lifted Nathan off his feet and slammed him against the wall again.

"We've a trail of bodies behind us," Brohm said, "what's one more? The guy's a fucking wreck, anyway. You'd be doing him a favour."

Nathan couldn't look into Brohm's eyes. What he saw there frightened him, saddened him. Finally, he nodded, and Brohm let him go. Nathan knew he was right. All this strife between them was his own fault. He risked both their lives with his selfishness.

They turned to watch the entrance of the tavern from their darkened nook. The storm did its job of keeping people off the streets, and the snow covered their tracks. A year ago, Nathan would've prayed for such conditions. It was a perfect night for an easy kill.

But tonight was different. This wasn't a mark. This was someone he had tried to save, but failed. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and pushed his emotions down. He'd done this nearly his entire life. He could do it again. One last time.

* * *

Two drawn-out hours passed. Neither of them spoke more than a dozen words, leaving Nathan to wallow in dark thoughts. While the alleyway provided shelter from the biting wind, his hood could only provide so much protection, and the cold stung his face.

At last, they caught sight of Tarn leaving the Green Barrel. He ambled westward into the winds, holding an arm up to shield his face from the blowing snow. Nathan and Brohm followed behind, keeping a fair distance, posing as drunk patrons making their way home. Nathan had no idea where home was for Tarn, but it didn't matter. He was only waiting for the right

opportunity to strike.

Tarn's pace was unsteady, lurching in the deep snow. Nathan had no doubt of his ability with his weapon, but considering his heart wasn't completely set to task, knowing Tarn was inebriated would make the job easier. Brohm shadowed him, leaving Nathan curiously self-conscious about having an audience watch him work. Earlier, while they were lingering in the shadows of the alley, he'd asked Brohm to wait at home. The big man refused. Either it was a lack of trust, or his way to provide strength needed to complete the job. Possibly it was both.

They continued to follow Tarn until he stumbled onto a lesser-used side street. Nathan signalled to Brohm it was time to act, and with Tarn out of sight, they rushed to the edge of a building and peeked around the corner.

"Stay here," Nathan whispered.

Brohm returned a solemn nod and leaned against the wall, acting as a deterrent for any passerby who might be too curious for their own good.

Nathan pulled his dagger free and stalked his prey. Stealthily prowling through the snow, he caught up to the staggering form. Without hesitation, Nathan reached around to cover Tarn's mouth with a hand, then cut across his throat with a clean slice. A surge of blood cascaded down—a harsh contrast against the white snow. Holding his neck, Tarn collapsed to his knees and turned to identify his attacker.

"I'm sorry," Nathan whispered. "I tried to stop you, but you couldn't keep your damn mouth shut."

Tarn fell onto his side. Bloodied fingers, curled in anger, reached for him. He tried to speak, but could utter nothing but ragged, wet gasps. Footsteps—a familiar heavy gait—crunched in the snow behind Nathan. Upon reaching Nathan's side, Brohm rested a hand on his shoulder. It brought Nathan no comfort, but that was fine. He wasn't seeking it. He wanted the pain. He wanted to remember this, to learn from it. They watched in silence as hot blood pooled and melted the snow. Tarn's body slackened and then finally—mercifully—stilled.

Brohm allowed a moment to pass before speaking. "We should go."

Nathan ignored him and loomed over the body, turning it onto its back.

"What're you doing?" Brohm asked with urgency.

Nathan pulled the cloak back, revealing a coinpurse tied to the Tarn's belt. He wiped his blade clean, and then cut the purse strings.

"It needs to look like someone robbed him, otherwise it'd raise suspicion."

"Oh, right," Brohm mumbled.

Nathan squeezed the purse, feeling the coins within. They were likely the same coins he'd given him as payment. Now he'd taken them back, along with Tarn's life. His stomach roiled, and he swallowed bile rising in his throat. He *would* remember this. This was his punishment for letting emotion cloud his judgement. The guilt should weigh heavy. He deserved nothing less.

Large, wet snowflakes continued to fall, already beginning to cover their

old tracks as they doubled back. The street remained deserted. No one was foolish enough to be out in this weather. What did that say about them? As they passed under a streetlamp—its flickering light losing against the blizzard—Nathan felt Brohm's gaze upon him. The big man moved closer to wrap an arm around his shoulder, but Nathan dodged aside.

"Nathan, I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for. This was my fault. Right from the start, you knew what was best for us, yet I didn't heed your words. I should be the one apologizing to you."

"I should've just taken care of this myself."

"No, you were right. This was my problem to fix."

Brohm moved in again to console him, but Nathan stepped away.

"I'm not looking for your pity," Nathan said. "I don't deserve it."

"I know it's hard. Let me—"

"No! I don't deserve you."

The big man's wet eyes glinted in the dim lamplight. "That's not true. Don't say that."

"Go home, Brohm."

"No, not without you. I don't care what you say," he said, taking him into his arms.

Nathan pulled away from his grip. "No. Let me go!"

Brohm stood dumbfounded with arms outstretched, beckoning him, but Nathan distanced himself.

"Don't follow me."

The big man stood there, watching him trudge away into the night. Tears stung Nathan's eyes, and he roughly wiped them away. His entire body tensed with conflicting emotions. So filled with rage he felt ready to burst. His heart ached at the thought of hurting his only friend by speaking those words. His legs weakened, threatening to collapse under the weight of his despair.

He just wanted everything to end.

* * *

Nathan woke to a hand shaking his shoulder. Wincing at the deafening crowd, he found himself slumped at a table filled with an array of empty glasses and tankards.

"Hey boy-o," someone said, "this isn't a place to sleep."

Everything was a blur, and his head swam. He recalled finding a tavern, and the prospect of drinking until passing out felt the right thing to do. He laid his head back down again on the table, and the din died away as he slipped back to unconsciousness.

The next time he woke, he found two men shouldering his weight. His

feet dragged on the ground, but attempting to gain purchase proved fruitless. Laughter surrounded him. He blinked, trying to focus his view. A door opened, and a blast of cold air hit him. The two men tossed him outside and slammed the door shut. The shock of snow on his face brought him to his senses, but it took all his strength to lift himself against the side of the tavern's façade. Turmoil in his belly announced the inevitable, and he gagged once before vomiting. A figure drifting in the falling snow caught his eye as he wiped his chin. It approached cautiously.

"Do you need help?" the man asked, his face hidden by a deep hood.

Nathan considered the request before answering. "I guess I do."

The figure held out a gloved hand, tattered and dirty. Nathan accepted it and pulled himself to his feet, only to lose his balance. The man caught him before he fell, allowing Nathan to lean against him.

"Where's home?" the man asked.

The apartment was closer than the guildhouse, but the prospect of Brohm seeing him like this wasn't an option.

"It's just outside town."

"Lead the way, if you can."

Nathan stood, pulling away from the man. "I can make it there myself. Thanks for the help."

He took a few steps, but his balance failed and he fell into the snow in a heap. The man rushed to his side and helped him up again.

"Are you sure you don't need my aid? 'Tis not a night to stumble in the dark."

"Why do you care?"

"Can one not help a fellow in need?"

Nathan conceded with a sigh and led them west out of town. The snow still fell with unrelenting vigour, making it hard to keep his footing. As much as he hated to admit it, he was glad the stranger insisted on helping.

"This is your home?" the man asked upon arriving at the guildhouse.

"Yeah. Me and a partner."

They stumbled inside, and Nathan pointed in the near dark at an oil lamp hanging nearby. Once lit, the stranger lit a fire in the large hearth that took up most of one side of the common area. Nathan collapsed nearby, watching the man tend to the fire.

"'Tis a large abode for two people," he said.

"It's gonna be a house for the Adventurer's Guild. A home away from home for its members."

"I see."

Nathan sat up. "Who are you? Why are you helping me?"

Despite being free of the storm, the man never pulled back his hood, and his face remained hidden in shadow. "The name is Cormac. I helped people in my old life, and there is no reason to stop now."

"Old life? What do you mean?"

“I was a monk. I dedicated my life to serve the gods and my fellow man.”

“But you’re not anymore?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Silence answered, and Nathan suddenly felt ashamed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Cormac warmed his hands near the flame. “’Tis alright. The curiosity of man is no failing trait.”

Nathan lay on his side, finding it difficult to keep his eyes open. “You can stay the night, if you like.”

“Your kindness is appreciated. I thank you.”

Nathan smirked. “You just helped me home, hoping for shelter, didn’t you.”

Cormac turned his head, enough for Nathan to catch a glimpse of a subtle smile. “Can it not be for both reasons?”

Nathan grunted a laugh and fell back. His eyelids involuntarily fluttered closed in exhaustion.

Cormac continued. “You surprise me. You seem a good man, but your aura tells me otherwise. I’m not sure what is true anymore.”

Nathan tried to decipher Cormac’s words, but the need for sleep was too strong, and he had no power left to fight it. Distant cawing crows forced him to open his eyes again. Dull, grey morning light creeped through the windows. All that remained of the fire were glowing embers, and the frigid air encroached upon him.

Cormac was nowhere to be found, and Nathan questioned whether or not he’d dreamt the encounter. The events of the previous night came rushing back, and the crushing despair returned, looming over him. Shaking from the cold, he squeezed his head in an attempt to relieve the pounding pain in his skull. He willed himself up and threw more logs into the hearth, hovering as close as he dared to warm himself. Not too long after, familiar footsteps came up the veranda, and Brohm anxiously entered.

“You’re here,” the big man said, closing the door before more cold air blew in.

Nathan turned his attention back to the fire. He wasn’t ready to face him yet. Brohm remained at the door a moment before stepping closer.

“You okay?”

Nathan shrugged as he sat down beside him.

“Smells like you’ve been doing some heavy drinking,” Brohm muttered.

“Can you blame me?” Nathan couldn’t help but glance over. “You look pretty awful yourself.”

Brohm rubbed his red eyes. “Was worried about you. Couldn’t sleep.”

The crackle of the fire filled the silence between them. Nathan normally enjoyed their quiet moments, but this time, it left him feeling awkward.

Brohm spoke again, tentatively. “What you said last night—did you really

mean it?"

"I said a lot of things. All of them were true." Nathan wanted to add he could only make so many mistakes before Brohm would finally wise up and leave for good.

"But you can't mean it. I thought you . . . you—"

"You think I love you? I do, Brohm. Gods! More than I thought possible."

"Then how can you say those things?"

"Because I don't *deserve* you. I care for you too much to put you in danger again."

"You reckon you can push me away that easy?"

Nathan fought back tears. "I never said it would be fucking easy!"

"And what about me? Don't I get a say how this ends? I don't wanna leave you, and I'm pretty damn sure you don't wanna leave me. Yuh, I was mad about the whole thing with Tarn, but that's over now."

Nathan didn't want this to be so effortless to reconcile. He hated the fact Brohm was so forgiving, so understanding, so willing to exonerate the horrible mistake he'd made. A hand held his cheek—its warmth seeping in—turning his head to Brohm's gaze. Those emerald eyes pierced through him. His breath caught in his chest, just as it did the first time they met.

"I don't want to do this alone," Brohm said. "I can't do this alone."

Nathan's restraint broke. Reduced to racking sobs, he fell into Brohm's arms, held tight to his chest. Brohm soothed him as best he could, hugging him until the worst had passed.

"Gods, I'm a mess," Nathan said.

They both laughed—a wonderful release of tension between them both.

"Brohm, I swear, if you tell me something's wrong, I won't question you again."

"That's all I can ask for. But reckon that goes both ways, yuh?"

"I have no memory of you making any decisions that risked our wellbeing," Nathan said with a stern look.

"Just wait then. I'm bound to mess up sooner or later."

Nathan couldn't imagine it. Time and again, Brohm stood as the voice of reason between the two of them. He wasn't perfect, of course, but Nathan wouldn't have him any other way.

Chapter Four

After months of planning, hard work, and travel, Nathan and Brohm now felt antsy having nothing to do. They spent many of those empty days talking about the incident with Tarn, finally allowing Nathan to accept it and move on. He hoped Tarn would be the last person—at least the last innocent person—he'd need to murder.

The spare time allowed them to move their belongings from the apartment into the guildhouse, finally calling it home. Brohm spent a great deal of time outside, chopping down trees from the edge of the ravine to feed the hearths. Nathan tried to help, but found himself getting in the way, and decided to leave him to it.

Brohm didn't seem to mind either way. "Nothing much beats a hard day's work," he'd told Nathan one evening. He'd always arrive wet from the snow and sweat, and despite wearing gloves, splinters would mar his hands. Regardless, he'd always walk in with a satisfied grin on his face. Nathan was sure to have plenty of hot bath water ready, for which Brohm was always appreciative. Come nighttime, he assumed the big man would be dead on his feet, but Brohm was often ready for some fun between the sheets. Of course, after that—his energy reserves finally spent—he'd snore up a storm.

A letter arrived by courier a few days later, announcing Hobb was behind schedule to start work on the smithy.

"Can't say I'm surprised," Brohm said. "He seemed like a busy guy. Anyway, reckon they'd have a tough time building a smithy with all that snow outside. I don't see why they don't just wait until spring."

"They must know what they're doing."

"Yuh, but we're footing the bill, remember? Probably gonna cost extra—"

"You hear that?" Nathan asked.

Brohm cocked his head. "Sounds like horses."

A knock at the door came before Nathan could look out the front window, and he opened it to reveal a tall man bundled in layers.

"Can I help you?" Nathan asked.

"Iain Cauldwell," he said in a bitter tone, letting himself in. "I'm your bookkeeper."

"Wait, what?" Nathan asked.

Iain drilled him with an iron stare. "This is the new Adventurer's Guild, is it not? Millsfield branch?"

"Yeah. Sorry, we just assumed we'd get notice before anyone's arrival."

"I trust you can take me in."

"Of course. Uh, where's your stuff?"

"The driver is bringing it up. Be sure to pay him."

Nathan stepped outside to find the buggy driver struggling with a massive chest. He rushed to his aid, and the two managed their way back inside, stepping into an argument between Iain and Brohm.

"What do you mean there's no food?" Iain said.

The big man flashed Nathan an angry glance before replying. "Neither of us are good in the kitchen. We just eat at taverns."

"What kind of branch is this? You don't have someone working the kitchen?"

Nathan stepped up. "You're the first of our staff to arrive. I guess it just worked out that way."

"Shaw, you idiot," Iain mumbled under his breath.

"What about him?"

"He arranged this blasted transfer. Pulled me from a comfortable arrangement. In a city. Civilized. Now, I'm in the middle of nowhere."

The driver returned with the rest of Iain's belongings, and Nathan handed him some coin.

"A right whiner that one is," the driver whispered to him. "Good luck to you."

Nathan gave him a few more coins for his troubles and ushered him out, closing the door against the cold. The common room was silent, but Iain appeared ready to explode.

"We'll show you to your quarters," Nathan said, motioning to Brohm to help him with the chest.

They led him to the second floor, explaining he could have the room of his choice. Instead of exploring, he pointed to the nearest door from the stairs.

"This will do fine," he said while entering the room.

They followed, placing the chest in a corner. While Brohm went to get more of his belongings, Nathan pulled Iain aside.

"Listen, I get you're not happy with the transfer, but it does no one any good to get upset. We'll do our best to make sure the transition is a smooth one, alright?"

Iain rolled his eyes, but a glimmer of reason shone through. "Very well. I . . . apologize for my demeanour. I'll admit I'm tired from the trip. Nearly a fortnight on a cold and wet ship hasn't helped my mood."

"Where'd you come from?"

"The city of Dalton. Travelled north along the western shores to get here."

Brohm appeared in the doorway, encumbered by bags and boxes. "How about a little help, yuh?"

* * *

Iain's arrival broke the dam. Within a few days, a steady stream of new

arrivals appeared at their doorstep. Leah and Edgard arrived as a team, providing much-needed joy to the empty guildhouse. Leah, petite and beaming with energy, was ecstatic as soon as she stepped into the common room.

"Oh, this place is huge," she said, her long locks of hair bouncing as she hopped in excitement. "Edgard, look at that hearth."

Her companion—a stout man with round, ruddy cheeks—was their new cook. After a brief introduction, he asked to see the kitchen, and it only took a moment before he uttered a grunt of approval.

"Once the larders are stocked, you'll never be hungry again," he stated with a grin.

Leah worked alongside Edgard to run the front of the house. The two were inseparable, to the point of choosing rooms next to each other. Brohm revelled in the enthusiasm they spread, and—no surprise to Nathan—became fast friends with Edgard. His jovial nature spread over to Brohm, which in turn made Nathan happy.

The only person who didn't appreciate them was Iain. While he remained relatively neutral toward Edgard, likely due to the delicious meals he whipped up with ease, Leah's squeaky voice always soured his expression. As a result, he often hid in his office to arrange the financial affairs of the guildhouse—at least that's what he said he was doing. It didn't matter. The less interaction people had with Iain, the better it was for everyone involved.

Zoe, the blacksmith, arrived a week later. Nathan couldn't decide what he thought of her. She was pleasant and friendly to everyone, however it was obviously a chore for her. In many ways, she was Leah's opposite, including her short hair. Of course, given her vocation, having short hair made sense.

One sunny afternoon, Nathan caught a glimpse of Zoe in the backyard field through a second-floor window. It wasn't the first time he'd seen her out there. From behind him, lumbering footsteps broke his thoughts.

"Hey l'il buddy, what you doing?"

"Zoe's out there again."

Brohm joined his side and peered through the window. "Just exploring, I reckon."

"It feels like she's not happy here."

Brohm wrapped an arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. "Just give her some time to adjust. If she's still glum, reckon there's no harm to ask and make sure she's alright." He gave Nathan a squeeze to change the subject. "Anyway, Edgard told me he's got some goodies ready to eat."

Nathan rubbed Brohm's belly and gave him a sly grin. "Seems you two have hit it off."

"Yuh, a match made by the gods," he said, chuckling.

They made their way to the kitchen, finding Leah and Edgard sampling bite-sized cakes.

"Sid, you gotta try 'em," Leah said.

He rushed ahead of Nathan and popped one in his mouth, followed by an inappropriate moan. “Edgard . . . these are—”

“Delicious!” Leah exclaimed, pinching the cook’s cheek.

Edgard, his red face deepening in colour, laughed gently. Nathan sampled one from the tray, enjoying the sweet and savoury delight.

“You have a real gift,” he said.

“Damn right he does, boss,” Leah said, biting into another.

“Can you keep it down?” came Iain’s voice from the closed office door adjoining the kitchen. “Some of us are trying to work.”

Leah raised an eyebrow. “That guy. What’s his deal?” she whispered.

Nobody had an answer.

“Well, I can’t take it anymore.”

She picked up the tray and knocked on the door. “Oh, Iain,” she said in a sickly melodic voice. “I have something for you.”

The door opened in a flash, and Leah raised the tray dangerously close to Iain’s face.

“These’ll make you feel better,” she said.

Iain stepped back to focus on what had nearly struck him in the face, and for a brief moment, his angry demeanour softened. After a breath of hesitation, he delicately helped himself to a morsel.

“Thank you, Leah, Edgard,” he said in a calm voice. “Now please, respectfully, I ask that you keep your voices down to a reasonable level.”

Nathan nodded. “Sorry about th—”

A voice from the front room interrupted him. “Hello? Anyone here?”

Nathan and Brohm, with the rest of the crew in tow, stepped through the door to find a man holding his hat.

“Is this the Adventurer’s Guild?” he asked.

“It is,” Nathan said. “Can we help you?”

“I’ve been searching for help all day. The town guard? Useless. Even the militia ain’t willing to help. They told me about this place. Please, I—”

“Whoa, slow down. Take a seat and let’s talk about your problem.”

The man accepted his offer and sat at one of the tables. Nathan and Brohm joined him while the rest stood by the bar, openly eavesdropping.

“I ’preciate it. Name’s Darren. I’m a farmer from ’cross town.”

Nathan and Brohm introduced themselves.

Darren nodded in greeting and continued. “It’s my livestock, my cattle. Nearly all’s been butchered.”

“Wolves, you reckon?” Brohm asked.

“I don’t rightly know. The barn looks like a slaughterhouse. Blood’s everywhere. Never seen anything like it.”

“And you’d like us to investigate?” Nathan asked.

“That’s right. If it’s animals, they need to be put down. If men did this, I want justice.”

Nathan looked over to Brohm. “Shaw wasn’t kidding when he said a

branch was needed here. We don't even have members or a job board up yet, and work's already arrived."

Darren glanced nervously at them. "Are you not able to help?"

Nathan raised a hand to calm him. "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. Sid and I will take care of it for you."

Relieved, the farmer stood up and headed for the door. "Light's wastin'. I'll show you the mess."

"Whoa," Iain interjected. "We should discuss the cost for our services."

"Oh, good point," Nathan said. "Sorry. Give us a moment, Darren."

He motioned Brohm and Iain into the kitchen so they could speak privately.

"You're the money guy," Nathan said. "How much?"

Iain pondered with a finger to his chin. "Obviously, there's the unknown element. We're unsure who or what we're dealing with. For the sake of simplicity, call it ten silver."

Brohm scratched the back of his head. "Yuh? Reckon that's a bit low."

Iain stood pleasantly surprised by Brohm's comment. "Very well. How does fifteen sound?"

Brohm nodded, and they stepped back into the common room to state their price to Darren.

"Yes, that's fine. Now please, let's get going."

They dressed hastily for the cold weather and armed themselves—Brohm tightening his sword belt and Nathan strapping on his dagger. The farmer appeared gratified they meant business. As they approached the stables, Zoe called out from beyond the guildhouse.

"Where you guys headed?"

"Farmer's livestock was killed," Brohm said. "We're off to check it out."

"Need help?"

"Yuh. Reckon more help's always good. Where's your blade?"

She jogged toward the guildhouse entrance. "Let me fetch it. I'll only be a moment."

* * *

Upon reaching the farmer's property, Darren led them to a barn a fair distance from his house. A trail of something heavy being dragged led from the barn exit into the woods nearby. Streaks of blood marred the virgin snow. The scene inside was much worse than Nathan could've expected. Frozen gore covered the ground, making for uneven footing. Blood splattered the walls. Cow carcasses were strewn about—some intact, others ripped apart in brutal fashion. Nathan had witnessed violence throughout his life, but nothing as savage as the display before him. While there was no sign of tracks or

footprints, he was certain no animal did this.

"Darren, do you have any enemies?" he asked while they retreated from the barn.

The farmer shrugged. "I live a simple life. I've no time to make enemies."

"Okay, you head back home," Brohm said. "We'll follow the trail."

Darren wished them well as they trudged into the woods. While the trail of blood gradually diminished, the heavy carcass dragged through the snow left a clear imprint to follow. Unfortunately, it also obscured any footprints to give Nathan a clue how many people were involved.

"Who would do such a thing?" Zoe mused. "How disturbed would you need to be?"

"Dunno," Brohm said, huffing from the exertion of walking through the deep snow. "Anyway, it feels good to be outside, yuh? Even if it means hunting some crazed cow killers."

Nathan chuckled in spite of himself. "You really know how to lighten the mood."

Brohm looked back with a confused frown. "What'd I say?"

Zoe managed to crack a smile, then pointed ahead at a large outcropping of rock. The trail headed into the mouth of a small cavern.

"Of course it had to be a cave," Brohm mumbled.

"What's wrong with caves?" Zoe asked.

"He's had some bad experiences with small spaces," Nathan said, patting Brohm's shoulder.

Red-faced, Brohm shrugged his hand away. "It's no problem."

Nathan knew that was a flat-out lie, but didn't want to embarrass him further. Pulling their blades free, they snuck up to the entrance. Silence greeted them. Nathan motioned for them to stand guard, and bent over to step into the black maw. Keeping a cautious pace, he traversed the jagged stone bedrock, allowing time for his eyes to adjust. After ten metres of ponderous advance, he stopped to listen. Silence remained.

He sheathed his dagger and briefly glanced back toward the entrance. Brohm peered in, his shape silhouetted against the overcast sky. Nathan continued into the dark, only to slip on the uneven floor and land painfully with a grunt. The noise roused something from deeper within. A foreign language spoken in the high voice of the child, but twisted with malice. One voice brought another, then more still. Goosebumps covered Nathan's skin, and he immediately turned back, clawing at the ground to gain purchase.

"We've got company."

"Get outta there!" the big man yelled.

Cackling, inhuman laughter echoed from the dark, approaching closer with each passing moment. Nathan scrambled on his hands and knees for fear of bashing his head against the roof of the cave, but his advance wasn't swift enough to escape whatever horror lurked in the gloom. The laughter didn't echo anymore. Whatever chased him was scant metres away.

Near panic, he pulled his dagger free and turned to face them. Short figures, their wet skin shiny in the dark, ran at him. As soon as one was within reach, he thrust his dagger at its chest. It howled in pain, falling to one side, and the others skittered back in defence. Nathan took the opportunity to crawl backward toward the light, but their caution was short-lived, forcing him to swing his blade wildly to keep them at bay.

Brohm grabbed him from behind and pulled him out of the hole to his feet. Finally out of the dark, Nathan gained his wits and stumbled away from the cave, taking Brohm and Zoe with him.

"What are they?" Zoe asked.

"I've no idea. I think I killed one, though."

They turned to find four squat, naked creatures emerging from the darkness. Sinewy yet spindly forms with pale-green skin. One nearest to them flashed a wicked grin—a frightening display of pointed teeth. Two others scampered up the rock face and lunged at Nathan baring clawed hands. He managed to push one off, but the other hung on, trying to bite his neck. His dagger sank into the creature's side. It squealed an unearthly scream and fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Meanwhile, Brohm and Zoe swung their swords ineffectually. Their broad swipes were too sluggish to hit the remaining creatures, only managing to keep them on the defensive. Once the creatures were cornered against the rock face, Brohm lunged ahead to close the space and swung, only to miss again as they climbed out of reach. Brohm growled in frustration and fell back to Nathan's position.

"I can't hit 'em."

"They lower their guard when they attack," Nathan said. "Let them come to you."

Upon reaching the top of the cliff, the creatures spoke briefly in their bizarre tongue.

"Come on, you little shits. Get down here!" Brohm yelled.

They hissed in return, then scampered out of sight.

"We can't let them get away," Zoe said.

They gave chase, scaling the five-metre rock cliff, but the creatures were nowhere in sight once they reached the top.

Nathan pointed to footprints in the snow. "There. Follow those tracks."

They led into denser woods, haphazard in their direction but ultimately away from the cave entrance. Then abruptly, the trail ended. Nathan caught sight of claw marks on the nearest tree, and immediately knew it was too late to react. The creatures leapt from their perch, crashing down onto the three of them. Nathan fell over from the impact, dazed. The creature attacking Brohm bounced off and landed on his feet, wasting no time to run in and strike again. Despite being caught off-guard, Brohm swung true, managing to cut the head off the creature as it leapt at him. Zoe successfully sidestepped her attacker, dispatching it with ease.

A painful bite on Nathan's arm broke his dazed state. He grabbed the creature's thin neck in an attempt to free himself, but this had the opposite effect—sinking its teeth deeper into his flesh. Searing pain spiked through his arm, and he dug wildly through the snow with his free hand, trying to find his dagger. Brohm rushed over and thrust his blade into the creature's torso. It spasmed but held its bite, chuckling devilishly as it coughed black blood onto Nathan's arm, causing the pain to intensify.

"This thing won't let go," Nathan said through clenched teeth.

Brohm knelt down and gripped its head and jaw, forcing the mouth open. Once free of Nathan's arm, Brohm savagely twisted the creature's neck, ending its sickly laugh. Nathan held his injured arm gingerly, waiting for the pain to subside. Zoe joined his side.

"What's the damage," Brohm said. "Let me pull back your sleeve."

"I've never felt anything this painful before—augh!"

The slightest touch brought lightning arcs of pain from his arm into his neck and chest. Brohm, not wanting to hurt him further, held still.

"We need to get you to a healer," Zoe said.

Brohm nodded, brows knitted in worry.

"Just give me a minute. Help me find my dagger. I dropped it."

Brohm dug into the snow and found it, then slipped it into Nathan's sheath.

"I'm gonna go get help," he said.

"No, no. I'll be fine. As long as I hold my arm still, it's not too bad."

Zoe glanced over at the fallen creatures. "What were those things?"

Nathan shook his head. "We should definitely report this to the guild."

"Yuh. But what do we say to the farmer? If we tell the truth, word'll spread, and I reckon by week's end, fear'll take the town."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," Nathan said. "If there's more of those monsters about, it's better to have folks wary."

"Why don't we send a courier with a message to headquarters in Croydon and ask for some advice," Zoe said. "You wanted to report it, anyway."

Brohm nodded. "Yuh, good idea."

Nathan didn't like it. Nearly a fortnight would pass before they'd receive a letter back, but without a better idea to suggest, he nodded as well.

"You ready to move?" Brohm asked.

"I think so," Nathan said, carefully rising to his feet.

The shooting pain was nearly gone, replaced by a steady throbbing. Brohm led the way, trudging through the snow back to the cave. Zoe took up the rear, dragging the three creatures by their legs. She considered it prudent to hide the bodies. It would've been best to bury them, but without a shovel, the next best option was to drag them back into the cave, out of view.

Brohm asked Zoe to watch over Nathan while he hid the bodies. Given his claustrophobia, it surprised Nathan to have him offer such a job. He'd never succeeded in narrowing down a reason why Brohm was so frightened of

small spaces. During their time together, he'd managed to help him control it to a degree, but Brohm's anxiety always remained at the periphery. Every time he'd bring it up, Brohm would abruptly change the topic. Not wanting to make the big man uncomfortable, he never pushed the issue.

"How's it feeling?" Zoe asked.

Nathan grimaced as he sat against a tree trunk, trying to hold his arm still. "Not great. Help me get my mind off it?"

"You want me to tell you a story?" she asked with a smirk.

He chuckled, but immediately regretted it as a jolt of pain shot into his chest again. "Everything okay with you at the guildhouse?"

"Sure, why do you ask?"

"It's just . . . you seem a little distant."

"I do?"

"I've seen you outside a lot, alone. You seem to have a lot on your mind."

Zoe appeared vexed. "Oh, I didn't realize I was being watched—"

"Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. I just want to make sure everyone in the guildhouse is settling in okay."

"Honestly, I've just been bored. Things have been slow since my smithy isn't built yet. As for my walks, I enjoy quiet time alone. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"No, of course not."

Grunts echoed from Brohm's direction, and Zoe rose to investigate.

"It's best to leave him to it," Nathan said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I embarrassed him earlier about the cave thing. I think he's trying to prove a point."

Brohm's work was laborious. With a sword drawn in one hand and the leg of a creature in the other, he'd managed to pile the bodies fifteen metres into the cavern. The grey skies had darkened by the time he'd finished the task, and they headed back to the farm as quickly as Nathan could manage. Soon, the barn came into view.

"You two go to the horses," Brohm said. "I'll talk to the farmer."

Nathan and Zoe did so and watched from afar. Brohm spoke briefly, then the farmer handed him a small pouch and they shook hands.

"What'd you tell him?" Nathan asked once Brohm had returned.

"Rabid wolves, and that we took care of 'em."

"You think he believed you?" Zoe asked.

Brohm shrugged. "He didn't seem to care. He just seemed glad we dealt with it."

"Here's hoping there's not more of those things out there," Nathan said, glancing back at the woods.

Brohm helped him into his saddle. "I don't care what you say. We're going to a healer."

Zoe scoffed. "Of course we are. That bite looks terrible."

Nathan didn't want to fight both of them and sighed in resignation. "Do we even know where to find one?"

"Let's just head to the Barrel," Brohm said. "The barkeep'll know."

As Brohm suspected, the owner of the Green Barrel did know of a healer named Lorne, living on the outskirts of town. He pointed them southward and wished them a safe journey.

Evening was upon them by the time they were on their way. Cold winds bit their faces once they left the protection of the narrow streets. They approached a thicket of conifers, and fought their way through snow drifts. The healer's home, a small hut, was in good repair, and warm firelight glowed from one window, beckoning them.

Brohm dismounted and gently knocked on the door. "Hullo?"

"Who is it?" a concerned elderly voice on the other side answered.

"Uhm, you don't know me. My name's Sid. I have a friend here who needs your help. He's been bit by a wolf."

The door opened a crack, and the man's face appeared.

"I have coin for your time," Brohm said.

The man considered them for only a moment before opening the door wider. "Very well. Quickly, come inside. The name's Lorne."

Zoe helped Nathan off his horse and they entered. Lorne gathered a few lit candles and placed them on a table near the fireplace.

"My eyes aren't what they used to be," he said. "Come on over, boy. Let's see the wound."

Nathan sat, hesitating before removing his coat to reveal a shirt sleeve caked with dry blood.

"This'll likely sting," Lorne said.

He pulled up the sleeve, and Nathan sucked in air through bared teeth. The multitude of tiny holes oozed blood and—more concerning—thick pus.

"I've seen many bites in my day," Lorne said, pointing at Nathan's arm. "This wasn't caused by a wolf."

Nathan shared a brief glance with his companions.

The healer continued. "You shouldn't have waited so long. It's quite infected."

"What?" Nathan said. "It only happened a few hours ago."

Lorne scoffed. "Judging by what I'm seeing here, this wound is well over two days old. Look at the swelling of the skin, the redness here."

Lorne hobbled to a cupboard, collecting medical supplies.

"There's a jug of water and basin over there," he said, pointing. "Could you fetch that?"

Zoe did so while Brohm stood at Nathan's side with a comforting hand on his shoulder. Lorne fell to the task of cleaning the wound. It wasn't gentle, but certainly thorough. Nathan grimaced through the pain.

"So are you going to tell me what really happened?" Lorne asked.

"Honestly, we can't really say *what* it was," Brohm said. "You're right,

though. It wasn't a wolf."

"Care to describe it?"

"It had a lot of teeth," Zoe said.

Lorne glanced up from his work with a raised eyebrow. "That much is obvious." He abandoned his questioning and applied a poultice, wrapping it up with bandages. "Let this do its work. Leave it until morning and clean the wound again. If you get a fever, come see me again."

Nathan gently pulled down his sleeve. "Thanks for your help."

Brohm produced a few coins and handed them to the old man. He nodded in thanks and led them to the door.

"Be more careful next time," he said, opening the door.

They were met with blowing snow, and they shielded their faces from the onslaught.

"C'mon, l'il buddy," Brohm said as he helped Nathan onto his horse. "Let's get you home, fed, and tucked into bed."

* * *

Nathan woke the next morning to find the poultice had done its job. The skin around his injury was tender, but had regained a healthier colour. With Brohm's help, they cleaned the wound and wrapped it with clean bandages. A knock came at the door, and Brohm opened it to find Leah carrying a breakfast tray.

"Morning," she muttered, rushing past him to Nathan sitting in bed. "Whitter, I was worried about you all night. Are you feeling better?"

Nathan offered a weak smile. "Yeah, I'll live. What's all this?"

She beamed a smile. "I had Edgard cook up a hearty meal to help you recover. Eggs, bacon, sausage. A big pot of tea. I picked up fresh bread from the baker just this morning, too."

Nathan's eyes widened at the massive feast before him. Brohm reached out for a strip of bacon, but Leah slapped his hand away.

"That's not for you."

Brohm visibly wilted before her. "But . . . I'm hungry, too."

"There's lots left down in the kitchen."

"You could've brought me a plate, yuh?"

"You're not injured like the boss. Your legs work, don't they?"

Nathan chuckled at the two of them. This wasn't the first time he'd caught them teasing each other, and had he not known, he would've assumed they were siblings.

"Sid, help yourself. I can't eat all this," Nathan said.

"You're not hungry?" Leah asked.

"This is a lot of food."

She considered the tray's contents and let out a tiny giggle. "I guess you're right."

"Thanks, Leah. Be sure to thank Edgard, too."

She beamed another smile and left them to their breakfast. Afterward, Brohm and Leah insisted Nathan rest in bed for the day. He suggested they were overreacting, but both were resolute in their stance. The weather was foul—cold winds and heavy snow—and he decided a day of rest wasn't a bad idea after all, so he kept the fire in the bedroom stoked and napped under the warm covers.

After dinner, Edgard, Iain, and Zoe retired to their quarters. Leah, ever tireless, finished some last-minute cleaning at the tables. Nathan and Brohm sat by the hearth in the common area, listening to the howling winds outside.

"I wrote that report and gave it to a courier today," Brohm said. "Hopefully we'll hear back from Shaw soon."

Nathan nodded, absentmindedly smoothing the bandage on his arm. From time to time, pain would spike up to his neck and chest, but he considered it best not to tell Brohm. It would only worry him.

A gentle knock came from the front door. At first, Nathan considered it wind rattling the windows, but then it repeated itself, louder this time.

"Did you hear that?" Leah asked.

"Yuh. Someone at the door," Brohm said.

"In this weather? Are they mad?"

She flopped a rag over her shoulder and rushed to answer the door. Standing under the protection of the veranda was a hunched man. He brushed snow off his heavy cloak as he spoke to Leah.

"Whitter, it's for you," she said. "His name is Cormac."

Nathan rose from his seat in surprise.

"Who?" Brohm said.

Nathan spoke under his breath. "This guy helped me home that night I was drunk out of my mind."

"What are you talking about?" Brohm asked.

"After we had that fight . . . about Tarn." Nathan approached them. "Please let him in."

Leah ushered Cormac out of the cold and closed the door. He pulled back his hood to reveal a face neither Nathan nor Brohm were expecting.

"It's *you*!" Brohm growled.

Standing before them was the beggar who had called out to them in the street. The beggar with fearful eyes.

"Yes, I saw the truth in you," he said. "In both of you."

Brohm stepped forward. "Yuh, you said that last time—"

"But after meeting and speaking with Whitter, I questioned what I saw."

Brohm huffed. "Enough of your riddles, old man. Leave!"

"In this storm?" Leah exclaimed.

Cormac held up his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Please understand. 'Tis

only my want to help you—"

"We don't need your help!" Brohm said.

"To help you overcome your immoral ways."

Brohm balled up his fists. "What?"

Witnessing the big man's rage caused Leah to inadvertently sidle up against Cormac in fear. Nathan jumped in the middle and held Brohm with his good arm, backing him away. "Whoa, calm down. Let's just take a breath and figure out what all this is about."

Brohm, jaw clenched, gave Nathan a withering scowl. They spoke in hushed whispers. "I don't trust this guy."

"He's a monk. He helped me."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

Nathan shook his head. "It didn't seem important. I didn't know it was him. I never saw his face."

Brohm stood unconvinced.

"The least we can do is hear him out," Nathan continued softly. He didn't know why, but he felt this was important. A gut feeling he couldn't explain.

Brohm glared at Cormac, then back to Nathan. "Don't make me regret this."

Nathan nodded his understanding. "Thank you." He turned around and gestured for Cormac to sit down at a table. "Leah, could you get our guest something to eat, please?"

She stood stunned a moment before finally speaking. "Uh, sure."

Nathan joined Cormac, with Brohm reluctantly in tow. The big man fell into the chair dramatically, sitting slumped, fingers tapping impatiently on the table.

"Cormac, could you explain in plain words what you've been saying?" Nathan asked.

"Of course. 'Tis not my purpose to confuse you, or anger your friend. To put it plainly, I see a person's intent, their aura. Both of you emit an aura of deceit and lies. Death follows you."

Brohm leaned forward. "You're not winning me over. What's your point?"

"I sense Whitter wishes to change this. You? Perhaps not so much."

"You're right. I'm thinking of murder right now," Brohm mumbled.

Leah came through the door from the kitchen with a plate of food, leftovers from their evening meal.

"I didn't know what you'd like to drink, but I figured hot tea on a night like this would work," she said.

Cormac stood and bowed graciously. "You are an angel sent by the gods. I thank you."

Leah, preoccupied by Brohm's angry stare, presented a forced smile.

"Could you prepare a room?" Nathan asked. "Cormac will be staying the night."

She tore her attention away from Brohm, nodded, then headed upstairs.

Once she was out of earshot, Nathan spoke. “Where were we?”

“Murder,” Brohm said.

Nathan ignored him. “You see people’s aura. Okay. How can that help us?”

“’Tis not my gift that will help you. ’Tis my guidance, if you’ll allow me.”

“Why do you want to help us?” Brohm asked.

“I’ve devoted my life to the gods, and to help my fellow man. Before me, I see pain. I wish to free you of that.”

“And in return?”

“In return, all I ask is room and board.”

Brohm scoffed. “And there’s the real reason you want to *help* us. To help yourself.”

“I don’t deny that. Perhaps if you saw this as a trade?”

“I’m not agreeing to anything yet,” Brohm said. “We need to talk about this.”

“Of course.”

After Cormac finished his meal and was shown his room, Nathan headed back down to the common room to find Brohm tossing another log into the hearth.

“I still don’t trust that guy.”

“He might be a bit weird, but it seems like he genuinely wants to help,” Nathan said.

“But how can he help us? Yuh, the truth is we’ve killed lots of people. We’ve lied to more. Do I like it? No, ’course not.” Brohm sighed. “It’s just how it is, and I can’t see how this guy can make that go away.”

“But what if he could?”

Brohm threw his arms in the air. “How?”

“I don’t know, but if we don’t give him a chance, we’ll never know.”

Brohm fell silent, and Nathan touched his arm.

“I know in wanting to change, I’ve made mistakes,” Nathan said. “Tarn was a big mistake. But this feels different.”

“Maybe.”

“Do you really think Cormac will be a problem for us? He already seems to know our past, but instead of persecuting, he’s willing to help.”

Brohm took in his words before speaking. “I just don’t know if I want to take that risk. If this ends poorly, it’s more blood on our hands.”

“We don’t need to end someone’s life to solve our problems.”

“Reckon that’s the only way I know how,” Brohm mumbled.

Unsure how to respond, Nathan gazed at his feet.

“But I’m so tired of killing,” Brohm whispered.

Nathan took his hand and squeezed tight. “I am, too.”

They sat in silence for a time before Brohm rose from his seat. “Let’s go to bed.”

"I've been sleeping all day. I'll join you later?"

Brohm nodded and lumbered upstairs.

Mesmerized by the flames, Nathan pondered deeply about their future. A fantasy of freedom he yearned for. Doubts clouded his mind, questioning whether they'd successfully barred their past deeds from haunting them yet again. Nothing specific came forward, but he wasn't ready to let wishful thinking lower his guard. Light footsteps descended the stairwell, breaking his concentration. He turned to find Leah standing on the bottom step.

"I figured you'd be asleep by now," he said.

"Just came down for a snack."

She stood at the base of the stairs, a troubled look on her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Can we speak a moment?"

Nathan gestured to the chair beside him. She padded over and sat in silence, hands nervously tapping against her leg.

"What's wrong?" he repeated.

Finally, she looked into his eyes. "I never thought Sid could be so angry. It scared me."

"Oh . . ."

"I always thought he was a harmless teddy bear."

"Most of the time, he is," Nathan said with a smile.

She appeared unconvinced. "But who was that man, Cormac? Why did he say those things about you? Something about immoral ways—"

"Don't worry about that," he blurted. "There's no reason to be afraid of Sid. Yes, he can get angry sometimes, but you'd have to do something pretty terrible to have that anger directed at you."

"Like what?"

Nathan grimaced inwardly. *Risk their lives by doing something stupid*, he thought. "I can't think of anything. He likes you, Leah. We all do. You're a bright ray of sunshine in this place."

Even in the low light, her reddening face was apparent.

"Please don't be frightened by him. There's no need."

She nodded slightly and rose from her seat. "Okay. Goodnight."

"Night."

She stepped into the kitchen and returned with a sweet roll Edgard had baked earlier that day. After offering a meek wave, she headed back upstairs. He continued to watch the flames slowly diminish, wincing as a stab of pain shot up his arm again. Curiously, the stinging didn't originate at the wound, but instead further up his aim. As quickly as it came, it disappeared again.

Finding himself nodding off, he decided to retire to the bedroom. Brohm was snoring, fast asleep. Nathan quietly removed his boots and undressed. He slipped between the sheets next to Brohm, whose warmth made for a comfortable transition from the cool air. Careful not to wake him, Nathan snuggled up and wrapped his good arm across his belly.

Mere minutes passed before he was sound asleep.

* * *

The next morning, while still in bed, Nathan and Brohm discussed the situation with Cormac. To Nathan's surprise, Brohm was receptive to a meeting. The big man was willing to give Cormac a chance—to seriously consider what the monk could offer them—but couldn't provide any guarantee he'd follow through with suggestions to change.

They appropriated Iain's office to speak to Cormac privately. After what Leah heard the night before, Nathan didn't want a repeat of the wrong words heard by the wrong person.

"Okay, Cormac," Nathan said. "What can you do for us?"

"The first thing I must insist on is to keep an open mind. 'Tis important that you want to change. Whitter, I sense within you a true want. Sid, you still have your doubts, yes?"

"Reckon so. I don't get what you can do to help us. We're not complete idiots. We know the difference between right and wrong."

"Of course, however I sense that your ability to do the *wrong* thing is too easy. You don't consider the consequences."

"We're only trying to protect ourselves."

Cormac nodded. "Very well, however your methods have been a violent route."

"Violence solves problems," Brohm said matter-of-factly.

"I'm here to tell you that violence isn't the solution to your problems." Cormac raised a finger to emphasize his words. "Violence creates problems."

Brohm sighed. "Listen, I wanna agree with you. We've already talked about this. We're tired of it. But killing works to shut people up for good."

Nathan couldn't believe Brohm was speaking so frankly to a man that, just the night before, he didn't trust at all. After such a bold statement, he expected Cormac to recoil in horror. Instead, he offered a gentle smile.

"What's important is you want to change. 'Tis something that won't come easy, but if you allow me to help you, 'tis possible." Cormac turned his attention to Nathan. "The second issue is the string of lies that trail behind you."

Nathan nodded, unsure how to respond.

Cormac continued. "You can easily find yourself caught in your own web of lies. Once trapped, you fall back to your violent ways as a means of escape. They go hand in hand. To stop one will aid you in stopping the other."

"But is it possible to permanently free ourselves?" Nathan asked.

"Depending on the complexity of your web, 'tis possible freedom would be out of your grasp. You may need to face the consequences to free

yourselves—"

Brohm visibly tensed. "Nope, that's not gonna happen. It can't."

For the first time, Cormac's sureness unsteadied, and looked to Nathan for another answer.

"He's right," Nathan said. "That'd be a death sentence. There's no way around it."

"Perhaps I could understand your plight better if you told me the details. In confidence, of course."

Nathan felt Brohm glaring at him.

"A new rule," Nathan said. "If you plan on asking for details again, walk away now. Our past is ours alone."

Silent tension filled the small office as the monk considered the two men before him.

"Very well. 'Tis a rule I can abide by," Cormac said with a bow of the head. "Perhaps in your case, your story—while false—can become the truth. Repeat it enough, and it will be accepted as fact without question."

"That was the plan," Brohm said.

"However, be sure you understand if your story has the slightest flaw, it will be picked at until it falls apart. This is why I made the earlier suggestion."

"Yeah, we understand that. It's a risk we take," Nathan said.

"Very well," Cormac said. "We shall never speak of your true past again."

Brohm noticeably relaxed. Cormac was about to continue, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door. Nathan opened it to find Leah.

"Sorry to bug you, boss," she said. "There's a team of workmen outside, led by someone named Hobb. He said you were expecting him."

Nathan and Brohm explained to Cormac that they'd have to continue their conversation another day, then entered the common area to find the burly foreman bundled up in fur and wearing giant boots.

"Hey, there they be," Hobb said, extending a hand out in greeting.

Nathan, fearful of the man's iron grip, nervously shook his hand. Hobb must've noticed Nathan's pained expression before, as his grasp was firm but painless this time. Brohm, however, saw this as his second chance to win their hand-shaking contest, and locked hands with the foreman. It didn't take long before Brohm's eyes widened as they shook.

"Okay, you win," Brohm said with a distressed chuckle.

Hobb barked a laugh and gave Brohm a hearty smack on the back. "We're ready t' start workin'. Show me where y'want this smithy."

When Zoe heard the news the team had arrived, she excitedly donned her coat and ran outside to meet them. She bonded with Hobb immediately, sharing stories and trading smithing techniques. It was the first time Nathan witnessed her happiness, and was finally clear to him this was her passion.

As they had no insight on where to build the smithy, Nathan and Brohm left them to it. Zoe suggested they build at the rear of the guildhouse, and soon Hobb and his crew were shovelling snow away and digging into the

earth to start the foundation. Nathan didn't envy the hard work ahead of them.

Later that afternoon, the job board they'd commissioned arrived, built by the carpenter, Gareth. At six metres in length, it was heavy and unwieldy to unload from the cart, but they'd managed to get it inside with the help of one of Hobb's workmen.

"I'll get the hammer," Brohm said, then turned to Nathan. "Nails are in the second-floor storage room. Can you get them?"

Nathan nodded and headed upstairs. He stopped at the window near the top of the landing that overlooked the backyard, and watched the smithy crew work. Despite being the middle of winter, the day was unusually warm. The sun beating down added to the warmth, and most of the men had stripped their coats, including Hobb. The giant of a man wore a thin shirt, soaked with sweat, revealing his well-built stature. Nathan stood transfixed by the sight, a slight grin drawn on his face.

Brohm climbed the stairs to find Nathan standing by the window. "Hey, did you find—"

Nathan jumped. "Huh, what?"

"Reckon I just caught you with your hand in the cookie jar. What're you looking at?"

Nathan felt his face redden. "Nothing . . ."

Brohm peered out the window while Nathan rushed to the small storage room. It was an unorganized mess, but he soon found a wooden box of nails sitting on a low shelf. Brohm stood waiting for him in the doorway.

"I don't think he'd be interested in you," he said.

Nathan knew exactly what he was talking about, but decided to play dumb. "What're you talking about?"

"Hobb."

Nathan shrugged. "Okay, so . . . he caught my eye. I like big guys."

"Is that the reason you like me?"

"What?"

"I might not be as big and strong as Hobb, but I'm still bigger than most."

Nathan smirked. "You're jealous?"

"Damn right I am!"

Nathan put the box of nails aside and approached him. "Don't be. You never have to prove yourself to me."

"You didn't answer my question."

Nathan sighed. "Okay, fine. Yes, when I first saw you, the attraction was purely physical. But getting to know you, it's so much more."

The statement helped to defuse the situation, but Nathan could still identify the lingering remnants of his jealousy. He held Brohm's cheek and gazed into his emerald eyes.

"I love who you are, not just what you look like. I only have room for one man in my heart, and it's you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Brohm wore the crooked smile he loved so much, and Nathan couldn't

resist embracing his friend. Brohm hugged him tightly.

"But you're cute when you're jealous," Nathan whispered in his ear.

"Shut up!" Brohm said with a chuckle, playfully shoving Nathan away and nearly knocking him off his feet.

* * *

That evening, the guildhouse was a hubbub of activity for the first time. Hobb and his crew ate heartily, and Edgard was more than happy to keep the hot food coming. Kegs of ale were cracked open, and soon the crowd was cheering and singing into the evening. Nathan and Brohm watched from their table, enjoying their own cups of ale. Hobb caught their eye and motioned to join in the fun, but Brohm shook his head with a smile. Seeming not to take that as an answer, Hobb approached and joined their table.

"I hope y'don't mind 'em," he said. "They enjoy their drink."

"Not at all," Nathan said. "As long as you don't break anything."

Hobb chuckled. "If that happens, they deal wit' me."

"How's the foundation coming?" Brohm asked.

"Slow. Ground's frozen. But once that's done, the building'll be up right quick."

"How long, you reckon?"

Hobb shrugged. "Week, maybe two."

Nathan leaned forward to speak privately, but given the raucous crowd, realized it was unneeded. "Have you heard any reports of strange creatures attacking livestock?"

"Creatures?" Hobb asked.

"Not animals, not human. They're short, pale green skin, lots of teeth and sharp claws."

Hobb stared at them incredulously. "Sounds like nightmares. You seen these?"

Nathan nodded. "Not far from here, other side of town. They slaughtered cattle, and attacked us when we went to investigate." He pulled up his sleeve to show his bandaged arm. "One of them bit me."

"You kill 'em, I hope?"

Brohm grunted in affirmation.

"First I hear o' this, but I don't really get involved in guild stuff beyond smithing."

"We reckon it best to keep it secret for now," Brohm said. "We've sent a report to Shaw. Asked for his advice."

"Good. Sorry I couldn't be more help." He jerked a thumb at the crowd. "You sure you don't wanna join me and th' boys?"

"We're good," Brohm said.

"Alright, your loss."

Hobb returned to his crew, joining in a song already in progress. Soon after, a man entered through the front door. At first, Nathan thought him to be one of Hobb's men, but judging by his attire and rucksack, was more likely a traveller. Nathan crossed the room to meet him, only then noticing the turquoise guild pin on his jacket.

"Welcome to the house," he said.

"Hey, I'm Ollie."

"Whitter."

"As soon as I heard about this place, I headed out straight away."

"Oh yeah, why's that?"

Ollie pulled the heavy rucksack from his shoulders. "I like to work at new guildhouses. The vacancy means more work for me." He pointed at the noisy men. "But it looks like I have competition."

"Nope," Nathan said. "These guys are builders, not guild members. You're our first."

Ollie beamed at his good luck.

Nathan continued. "As you can see, the job board is empty. For good reason, though. We just raised it today. Work is still slow here, but it's good to have you."

Ollie extended a hand, and he shook it.

"You must be tired," Nathan said. "I'll show you to your quarters."

"Actually, if it's all the same to you, I'm starved. Whatever you have cooking smells damn good."

"Sure. Why don't you join my partner and I," Nathan said, gesturing toward their table.

Ollie brought his belongings, unbelted his scabbard, and sat with them. After brief introductions with Brohm, Leah came to their table.

"What can I get for you?" she asked Ollie.

"Whatever you got, and lots of it, please."

She smiled and disappeared into the kitchen.

"So, Ollie, you seem a bit young for this kind of work," Brohm said.

Ollie rubbed his stubble-free cheeks. "I'm older than I look. I've been doing this for six years now, and learned a lot."

Brohm chuckled. "Were you in nappies when you started?"

Ollie rolled his eyes. "I'm twenty-seven."

Both Nathan and Brohm stared, unconvinced.

"Yeah, that's the expression I usually get." Using his fingers, Ollie framed his face like a portrait painting. "But the ladies love this mug of mine, so I don't complain."

Brohm burst out laughing.

"It's you two running the place?" Ollie asked.

Nathan nodded.

"Interesting. You two don't seem like guildhouse bosses."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Brohm asked.

Before Ollie could reply, Leah arrived with a plate heaping with mutton, potatoes and carrots, and a small loaf of bread with butter.

"This should sate that appetite of yours," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am. Much appreciated," he said with a smile.

She giggled. "Please, call me Leah."

He rose and bowed his head. "Thank you, Lady Leah, for bringing me this delicious bounty." He gently took her hand and kissed it.

She blinked, face flushed, unable to speak a moment. Nathan and Brohm exchanged glances.

"Thank you," Leah finally managed to sputter through a smile. She left the table, only to return a bashful glimpse over her shoulder before rushing back into the kitchen.

Ollie tucked into his meal, moaning in delight, oblivious to Nathan and Brohm's stare.

"She can really turn the ordinary into something special."

"She serves the food," Brohm said. "Edgard cooks it."

"Well, my compliments to your chef. I'll be sure to shake his hand as soon as we meet."

Nathan couldn't figure him out. As bombastic as his comments were, they seemed genuine at the same time. He couldn't decide if he liked him, or wanted to punch him in the face.

"Wanna fill us in what you said earlier?" Brohm asked.

Ollie looked up from his food, observed their expression, and finally realized something was wrong.

"Huh?"

"You said we weren't like other guildhouse bosses," Nathan said. "Care to elaborate?"

He smiled. "Sure. You guys seem too laid-back to run a guildhouse. I guess you could call it a compliment. I've worked for lots of guys, and they're always trying to assert their authority right from the start. All business, not friendly in the least. I know we've just barely met, but I get a good vibe from you two."

"Do you often serenade your servers?" Nathan asked.

"Well, you have to admit it's a thankless job. I try my best to be grateful to those around me, and be sure they know it."

"We can't fault you on that," Nathan said, "but you embarrassed her."

"Maybe a little, but I'm sure I made her day."

"You're sure about that?"

"The ladies love me, remember?"

Nathan's urge to smack Ollie bloomed considerably. "Just keep the theatrics to a minimum. Are you an actor or a guildsman?"

Ollie shrugged. "Why not both?"

"And keep your hands to yourself, yuh?" Brohm said. "Otherwise you'll

be dealing with me."

"I always ask permission first," Ollie replied with a wink.

To make his point clear, Brohm chugged the rest of his ale and slammed the tankard on the table. "I'm off to bed. You coming?" he asked Nathan.

"You go ahead. I'll make sure our *guest* has settled in nicely." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Brohm gave him a knowing nod. "Sleep tight, Ollie."

Ollie saluted with his fork. "Likewise."

Nathan sipped at his ale, casually watching Ollie in an attempt to understand him.

"You certainly speak your mind," he said.

"It's a curse I willingly bear," Ollie said between mouthfuls. "I try to be as truthful as I can. The world has enough liars."

"That mouth of yours must get you in trouble, though. There's a difference between being truthful and being arrogant."

"I can take care of myself if things get rough," Ollie said, gesturing at his scabbard leaning against the table.

"But if you kept your mouth shut at the right moment—"

"Then those needing to know something wouldn't learn," Ollie said, locking eyes with Nathan.

"But you're just a kid. How can you be right all the time?"

"I never said I was always right, but it doesn't take much wisdom to see the truth in things."

Nathan sipped his ale again. "I take it back. You're not a kid."

Ollie smiled. "Nope. I just look like one."

"You mustn't have many friends."

"I'll admit it's one reason I change guildhouses often. People can't stand me for long. You see? The truth can hurt me, too."

"But I can't understand why you need to speak your mind, when all it does is push people away."

Ollie chewed and swallowed, thinking a moment before speaking. "It's who I am. Just need to find someone who appreciates it, I guess."

"I admit there's something refreshing about it, but then, you haven't spoken ill of me yet."

Ollie cocked an eyebrow. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be at the receiving end of the truth soon enough."

* * *

The winter days passed uncounted. New guild members arrived sporadically, bringing with them stories to while the evening hours away. To Nathan's relief, none were as smug as Ollie.

Cormac continued his private conversations with both of them, but the worth of their talks remained a mystery to Brohm. That worried Nathan, knowing if Brohm considered it a waste of time, he'd have no interest in continuing. Nathan hoped this session would prove different.

"Let's start from the beginning," Cormac said to Brohm. "What do you want in your life?"

The big man scratched the back of his head, opened his mouth to reply, but shrugged instead. "What kinda question is that?"

"'Tis a question with no wrong answer."

Brohm sighed heavily. "I just want to . . ."

Cormac sat patiently in silence, letting him formulate an answer. Nathan urged him to speak by taking his hand. They shared a glance, and Nathan recognized fear in his eyes.

"I just wanna feel safe," Brohm mumbled.

"You feel unsafe here?" Cormac asked.

Brohm nodded. "Dunno why. Reckon all this talk has me thinking."

"About what?" Nathan asked.

"Just . . . everything. I've done more these past months than any time before. So much has changed. I'm not who I was."

"Do you miss who you were?" Cormac asked.

Brohm thought a moment, and then looked to Nathan. "No, reckon not. I was a bad guy, but didn't care. Then I met you. Everything changed. I started caring what I did to others." He took a breath. "Gods, I feel sick to my stomach."

"What you're feeling is regret," Cormac said. "'Tis part of your journey to redemption."

Brohm's voice quavered. "But the things I've done. Dunno if I deserve it."

Nathan sat in stunned silence. Brohm's words mirrored his own feelings.

"True redemption doesn't come easily," Cormac said, "but if you come to terms with what you've done, and realize the pain you've caused, 'tis a step toward bettering yourself."

"I don't know how to do that," Brohm said. "Reckon my death is the only way to say sorry for everyone I've hurt, but I don't wanna die."

Cormac shook his head. "Death, 'tis the easy way out—you'd be relieved of the burden of remorse. By living, you are forced to come to terms with your actions."

Brohm nodded, blinking at the tears in his eyes. Cormac turned his attention to Nathan.

"You've been quiet," he said. "Speak your mind."

"Everything Brohm said relates to how I feel," Nathan said. "I've felt guilty for some time now. I tried to atone by helping someone I hurt, and—"

Brohm gripped his arm. "No."

Cormac didn't intervene. He simply waited, ever patient.

“I tried to help him,” Nathan continued. “But he got too close to the truth, almost got the authorities involved.”

Brohm shook his arm. “Stop.”

“I had to kill him to keep our secret safe.”

Brohm let out a sigh of resignation.

“’Tis a deed that occurred recently?” Cormac asked.

Nathan nodded.

“Do you regret it?”

“Of course I do!”

“Had this occurred a year prior, would you’ve regretted it?”

Nathan finally understood what Cormac was doing. His silence answered the question.

“You see? You’re a better person now, even though you killed that man.”

“But we never got caught,” Brohm said. “How can we be better men if we weren’t punished for it?”

“Would rotting in a cell or being hanged lessen your guilt? Would it make you a better man?”

Brohm considered his questions before speaking. “Reckon not.”

“Understand, I don’t condone murderers running amok, but I also don’t think locking men up does them any good. That you feel guilt for your actions? ’Tis its own form of punishment.”

Nathan scoffed. “That’s a strange way of putting it, but I guess you’re right.”

Cormac turned to Brohm. “I’m pleased you can confide in me, but I realize you still don’t trust me. As I learn more of your past, I understand why putting your trust in someone is so difficult. ’Tis your way of protecting yourselves. Continue to be wary, but don’t close yourself off completely. Without trust, you cannot grow.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Brohm said, “but it’s not.”

A knock at the door interrupted them again, and Leah popped her head in with an apologetic grimace.

“Sorry. There’s a courier here.”

Nathan didn’t want the conversation to stop between Cormac and Brohm, so he insisted they continue while he dealt with the courier. A woman stood at the entrance of the guildhouse, her cheeks red from the cold weather. In her hand was a wax-sealed letter.

“Greetings, sir,” she said. “I’m to deliver this message to Sid.”

Nathan caught sight of the turquoise pin on her cloak. “Sure, I’ll take it to him.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I must deliver this to him directly.”

“My name is Whitter. We’re partners at this guildhouse, and we’re expecting word from Shaw at Croydon. Is that from him?”

“I can’t disclose its contents. I have orders to personally hand this to Sid.”

Nathan huffed. “Fine. I’ll get him.”

He fetched Brohm, and the courier took him aside to speak privately. When Nathan tried to join the conversation, the courier held up her hand.

"Sir, please stand away," she said.

"This is crazy," Brohm said. "I'm just going to show him the message after I read it."

"I'm afraid not, sir. Once you've read it, I've been ordered to destroy it."

"What?" Nathan said. "What could it possibly say that only he can know?"

"I'm not privy to that information, sir. I have my orders. Please don't make this any harder than it needs to be."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Fine, do whatever you need to do. He's just gonna tell me what it says afterward."

"Yuh. Do they seriously think they can keep something between us?"

The courier, growing impatient, shrugged in reply. Brohm led her upstairs to one of the empty rooms, passing Zoe on the stairs.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Nathan explained the situation to her, and she found it just as odd. A few moments later, the courier descended the staircase, letter in hand. Brohm stopped halfway down and caught Nathan's eye. There was no question something was wrong. The courier stepped toward the hearth.

"Wait a minute," Nathan said, reaching out to stop her.

"Sir, please don't interfere!"

Before he could do anything, she tossed the letter into the roaring fire. Nathan raised his arms in anger.

"I don't understand. Why the secrecy? Why couldn't I read it?"

She turned to face him, clearly at wits end. "I don't know how many times I need to repeat myself. I know as much as you. Goodbye."

She spun on a heel and left before another word could be spoken. Nathan stared at Brohm in disbelief.

"We need to pack our bags and head to Croydon," Brohm said. "Shaw needs us."

"What. Now?"

Brohm nodded grimly and headed upstairs, and Nathan rushed to catch up.

"What did the message say?"

"There've been other run-ins with those things. As far as they can tell, they're coming from the south."

"Did they say how many?"

"It didn't go into detail. Shaw wants to brief us in person."

"But what are we supposed to do about it?"

Brohm shrugged. "It didn't say."

They reached their bedroom and fell to the task of packing travel apparel into rucksacks.

"I still don't understand why the courier had such strict instructions,"

Nathan muttered.

"That's one thing he was clear about in the letter. No one can know."

"What about the guildhouse? One of us should stay behind to make sure things run smoothly."

"Things're quiet," Brohm said with a shrug, "and there's enough men here to take care of any jobs that come in."

"This doesn't make sense. Both of us leaving makes things complicated. The message was sent to you—strictly you. Why do I need to go?"

Brohm hesitated a moment before replying. "It said Shaw wanted to see *us*."

"If that's the case, why couldn't I read it?"

"Nathan—"

"Did it say something else?"

"Stop!" Brohm's booming voice filled the room. He let out a curt breath and continued roughly thrusting clothes into his rucksack. "Don't argue with me, okay?" he said sternly.

Nathan stopped packing and watched him with trepidation. Brohm gave him a sidelong glance in return.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to yell," he muttered. "I just . . . I'm not in the mood to ride in the cold."

He fumbled while tightening the straps of his sack and hefted it onto his shoulder, vacating the bedroom without another word.

* * *

They hit the road in short time, pushing their mounts hard in hopes they'd reach the traveller's inn near the Helmsley Keep road before the end of the day. Nathan knew it was an impossible task, but Brohm remained determined. That blind determination did nothing to aid them, of course. Night had fallen by the time they finally reached the inn, and both men were exhausted.

Brohm said little and kept his distance from Nathan, blaming it on fatigue when asked. Even once in bed, Brohm gently pushed him away when he tried to get close. This continued the following days. A hard day's ride, a meal where little was spoken, and then an attempt to sleep. Brohm dispensed the same excuse for being distant, and each night, Nathan felt his heart crushed that much more.

By the fourth evening, Nathan couldn't take it anymore. It was an hour after they laid down to rest, but he couldn't sleep. Their room, lit by moonlight streaming through the window, was enough to perceive Brohm's sleeping form. Nathan wanted so badly to hold him, to be held by him, to feel his touch, his warmth. Yes, the big man lay beside him, but he might as well have been across an ocean. Nathan couldn't hold back his emotions any

longer and fell to racking sobs, covering his mouth to silence himself, but that didn't stop Brohm from waking.

"What's wrong?" the big man asked as he turned toward him. For the first time in days, his voice held compassion.

"I'd ask you the same thing," Nathan blurted. "We've been travelling together for days, but gods, I've never felt so alone."

Brohm was at a loss for words, but the guilt on his face spoke volumes. This hurt Nathan more than ever.

"Talk to me," he pleaded. "This all started with that damned letter. What did it say?"

Unable to hold his gaze, Brohm rose from the bed and leaned against the windowsill, peering out the window. He kept his silence. Nathan—fighting against the need to stand beside him—remained seated on the bed.

"I know the letter said something about me. But what?"

Brohm's head dropped. "I can't tell you."

"How important is it you keep this from me? I don't understand why you're acting this way."

"We'll reach Croydon tomorrow. Then you'll understand."

"What's the difference between you telling me now, and tomorrow?"

Brohm turned around. Moonlight—its cold, dead colour—highlighted his shape. A dark, hulking silhouette.

"Do you trust me?"

Nathan wiped his eyes. "Of course I do. Don't you trust me?"

Silence answered.

"Brohm?"

"If you trust me, don't ask questions. Not until we reach Croydon."

"Don't you trust me?" Nathan repeated.

Brohm turned back to the window, his shoulders heaving as he tried to hold back tears.

* * *

Neither man slept, and both were relieved to glimpse the first rays of sunlight overtaking the endless night. They left with haste and without words, wanting the journey to be behind them.

As the day wore on, closing in on their destination, Nathan grew anxious. His mind filled with terrible notions of what could be wrong. Worse yet, presuming Brohm would leave him for untold reasons left his stomach in knots.

Cresting a hill revealed Croydon on the horizon, and Brohm called out to hasten their pace. Nathan felt compelled to slow down, fighting the urge to turn around. His concern surrounding the letter from Shaw—and Brohm's

reaction to it—felt unimportant. Pulling the reins, he brought his mount to a standstill. Brohm continued a few moments before realizing he was alone, then turned his horse to look back.

"What're you doing?" he called back at Nathan. "Come on!"

Nathan knew he had to continue, but every muscle in his body refused to comply. Brohm drew near, his brows knitted in apprehension.

"You okay?" he asked.

Nathan's stare stood transfixed on the horizon, at Croydon. Try as he might, he couldn't look away.

"I'm afraid."

Brohm bit his lip, uncertainty growing on his face. He manoeuvred his horse parallel to Nathan's and took hold of both sets of reins.

"We'll go together the rest of the way. Nice and slow, yuh?"

Nathan didn't answer. Even if he wanted to reply, he wouldn't have been able to. His tongue felt thick, like a foreign lump of flesh in his mouth.

With Brohm in control, both horses trotted toward town. Upon reaching the guild headquarters, Brohm helped Nathan dismount, and led him to the main office. He greeted the receptionist who, as usual, found himself surrounded by a mountain of paperwork.

"Can you let Mr. Shaw know Sid and Whitter are here to see him?" Brohm said.

At the mention of their names, the receptionist stiffened a moment. His eyes darted between both of them before painting on a smile to cover his surprise.

"Certainly. Please take a seat."

Nathan shivered before following Brohm to the bench.

"Did you see that?" he whispered as they sat down.

Brohm gave him a confused look before shaking his head. "What?"

"That guy. When you said our names, he acted weird—"

"Mr. Shaw will see you now," the receptionist said, motioning for them to approach.

His wooden smile remained intact, and Brohm imparted Nathan a subtle nod in appreciation for his concern. They entered Shaw's office, finding him at his desk.

"Take a seat," he said flatly.

The unsettling judgement given by the receptionist was stronger still from Shaw. Reluctantly, they sat in chairs opposite his desk.

"I got the letter and followed your instructions," Brohm said. "But we need answers. You said Whitter's life is in danger, and you'd be able to help him."

Nathan turned to Brohm. "What?"

"You've been bit by a gobling, correct?" Shaw asked Nathan.

"Yeah, I was bit by one of those creatures," he said. "A gobling?"

"That's what we're calling them. Your description matched. You say you

killed five of them?"

"Yuh, that's right," Brohm said.

"You were lucky. Folks in the south reported larger mobs of them. We've had a few sightings outside Croydon. Have you seen any more since then? Any reports from citizens in Millsfield?"

Brohm shook his head.

"Good. As I said, we're pretty sure they're coming from the south. We assume they don't like the cold weather. But if we don't figure out the source soon, this whole area could be overrun come summer."

Nathan raised a hand, shaking it to get his attention. "You said my life's in danger? How?"

Shaw stared at Nathan for an uncomfortably long moment. "The bite you sustained has effects beyond a bad scar. We're still trying to understand it, but for nearly everyone who's been bitten, their sanity becomes . . . suspect."

Nathan's mind reeled. If he were honest with himself, he hadn't felt right since they departed on their journey, but he assumed it was caused by Brohm's sullen mood.

"But why the secrecy?" he asked, anger edging into his voice. "Why was it so important I be left in the dark?"

Brohm, guilt-ridden, stared at his feet.

Shaw sighed. "I apologize to both of you. If it's any consolation, Sid was given few details in case the truth was revealed."

"What truth?" Nathan cried.

A quick rap at the door caught their attention, and four men wearing white linen entered the office. Their size nearly matched Brohm's.

Nathan couldn't take it anymore. "Will someone *please* tell me what's going on?"

Shaw raised his hands in an attempt to placate him. "We just need to hold you for observation."

"What? No! You can't hold me here."

Brohm swiftly rose to his feet to shield Nathan from the new arrivals. "Hey, listen. He's fine. Reckon we just—"

"Sid, do you care about your partner?" Shaw asked. "Because if you do, you need to trust us."

"I barely know you," Brohm said. "No, we're leaving."

He turned to grab Nathan and escort him out, but meaty hands seized Brohm first. He was swift to react, spinning with a readied fist toward whomever had touched him. The wallop downed the man. Two others fell upon Brohm, forcing him to the ground before he could react. A litany of curses spewed from Brohm's mouth as his arms were held behind his back.

Nathan jumped to action. Pulling his dagger free, he leaped atop one of Brohm's assailants and held the blade against his throat.

"You let him go, then we're walking out of here."

Shaw stood wide-eyed at the scene before him. "Everyone just relax. Do

as he says."

The two men restraining Brohm released their hold, but Nathan's dagger remained on the man's throat until they were clear.

Shaw advanced with his hands up. "Sid, Whitter, I beg you to reconsider. Those afflicted have murdered others in madness. Their loved ones, their children. Whitter, seeing you react this way has me worried."

Brohm stood beside Nathan. "No, that's normal for him. We protect each other, no matter what."

"Would you consider staying in Croyden for a few days, just in case? Please, we just don't want anyone to get needlessly hurt."

Nathan shook from the adrenaline in his veins. The events of the last few days were crashing down on him, and he found himself furious.

"No!" he screamed. "We're leaving!"

He grabbed Brohm by the arm and stormed past Shaw and the four men. Upon crossing the threshold to the waiting area, the receptionist—who'd been listening in—immediately jumped back and stumbled against the far wall.

Shaw's voice echoed from behind. "Please. Reconsider."

To Nathan's surprise, he felt resistance from Brohm. At first trying to slow him, and then pulling free of his grip. Nathan turned to find everyone crowding the doorway, staring at him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Brohm gestured at Nathan's face. "You're all sweaty, pale. You okay?"

Nathan's vision doubled for a moment, and he blinked it away. He gazed at his hands. They were clammy, white. He looked back at the group, concern written on their faces. A surge of vertigo slammed into him, and his legs turned to jelly. Brohm leaped forward and managed to catch his fall. He was speaking, but Nathan couldn't decipher the words. His ears felt full of cotton.

His vision blurred and doubled again, but no amount of blinking helped to clear it. Brohm's voice rose to panic, and Nathan felt himself being shaken. Four faceless men loomed above, failing to move Brohm aside as he held Nathan tight.

Nathan couldn't understand what he was seeing. His vision shrank, its edges eaten by an ever-growing black void. The indistinct voices melted away. He fought against his closing eyelids, but the effort was more than he could give.

Everything turned dark and silent, and his awareness fell into a deep abyss.

Chapter Five

It began with a breeze. Gentle, warm, fragrant.

A rush of sound hit his ears. Birdsong, the rustle of long grass in the wind, the rise and fall of distant conversation. He couldn't determine the words, but their tone was jovial, peppered with laughter. Everything was harsh at first, however after drowning in a sea of silence, the contrast of any sound was painful.

With effort, Nathan opened his eyes warily, not wanting to overwhelm his senses any further. He was dumbfounded to find himself in his bedroom. Sunlight filled the space, but from his vantage point, he couldn't catch a glimpse of much else. He risked moving his head to the right, toward the source of the light. Brohm sat in a chair nearby, sleeping, his head slumped forward. A smile grew upon Nathan's face. It was always a pleasure to catch the big man in a state of vulnerable repose. He savoured it, enjoying the tug of emotion it brought.

The large window facing north toward the mountains was open. Another breeze rippled the thin curtains. Nathan frowned in confusion. It was the dead of winter. Questioning the warm breeze brought his last memory back to the surface. He abruptly sat up in shock, swinging his legs around and planting them on the floor. There was dizziness, but it was short-lived. He tried to speak, but only a croak emerged. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Brohm," he said hoarsely.

A pitcher of water sat on the bedside table. He filled a cup and drank. Brohm emerged from his nap, rubbing his eyes before realizing Nathan was up. He sat erect, stunned.

"Nathan?"

"How long have I been sleeping?" Nathan asked before pouring another cup of water. His voice was clearing up.

Brohm put a hand to his forehead as though he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "You're talking?"

Nathan grew concerned. "How long have I been out?"

The big man sat on the bed beside him and held him close. "It's late spring. I can't believe you're talking."

"What happened to me?"

"What do you remember?"

"Shaw's office, the fight with those guys in white . . ."

Brohm's mouth hung open. "Nothing after?"

"No. I—"

"I mean, reckon that makes sense. You've been awake, but completely out of it."

"What do you mean?"

Brohm gathered his thoughts before speaking. "You'd fallen unconscious but woke up soon after. You were so angry, completely out of control. They had to tie you down to a bed so you wouldn't hurt yourself. The worst was over a couple of weeks later, but you wouldn't talk. It was like you didn't care or something. You could walk around, feed yourself, all that stuff. But you weren't . . . *you*."

Nathan caught a shine in Brohm's eyes, waiting for him to continue.

"There were times I thought you were trying to break out of whatever held you, but it never lasted long. You just fell back to staring at a wall." Brohm hugged him, tightly this time. "I can't believe you're back."

Try as he might, Nathan had no memory of any of this. Perhaps it was for the best.

"And it was caused by that bite?" he asked, breaking the embrace to look at his arm. The scar was old, but there were still clearly defined marks where the sharp teeth had dug in. He touched it, feeling the texture of the wound. The pain he remembered felt like a dream.

"Yuh, that's what they said."

Distant laughter rose from the common area below.

"What's going on down there?" Nathan asked.

Brohm chuckled. "Reckon there's lots to fill you in on. The guildhouse has been popular. Shaw wasn't kidding when he said one was needed in Millsfield. As soon as word spread, jobs came in fast. Guild members have swarmed the place."

Nathan rose and opened the wardrobe to get dressed.

Brohm roughly made the bed as he continued. "Iain's still a prick, but the coin coming through this place made him a bit more tolerable."

"We're doing well, then?" Nathan asked.

Brohm presented a toothy grin and nodded. "Oh yuh, money's not a problem."

They headed downstairs, the noise growing louder as they reached the main floor. Someone was playing a guitar, poorly but with gusto. Nathan found the common area filled with members—a couple dozen at least. The tables were a mess of plates and cups. Brohm led him to the kitchen and opened the door.

"Look who's back!" he announced.

Leah spun from her work to find Nathan following Brohm through the door.

"Boss?!"

She broke into a run, colliding with Nathan in an attempt to hug him, but instead nearly bowling him over. They both laughed.

"You're talking?" she asked.

"I am," he replied.

Edgard flashed a grin and delivered a friendly slap on the back. "Welcome

back, m'boy. It's good to see life in those eyes again instead of just staring into space."

"That's what Sid told me. I have no memory of any of it."

Leah offered him a puzzled look. "How can that be?"

Nathan shrugged. "I'm just glad it's over."

Edgard jerked a thumb toward the kitchen. "You hungry? Got plenty of roast beef left from lunch."

Nathan nodded. "Sounds good. Though, do you mind if I eat back here? It's a little too loud for me out there."

The stout man smiled. "Of course. It's always nice to have extra company in the kitchen. Take a seat at the prep table, and I'll fix you a plate."

He did so with Brohm and an excited Leah in tow.

"This guy," she said, poking Brohm's belly. "Don't let him go! He kept watch over you the entire time."

"He did?" Nathan asked.

Brohm playfully swatted away Leah's hand.

"He loves you, you know," she mock-whispered in Nathan's ear.

Brohm blushed as he pulled her away to give Nathan some space. "That's enough, m'lady."

Leah acquainted Nathan with guildhouse news, but his attention remained on Brohm. He caught his eye, and the big man gave him the crooked smile he loved so much.

* * *

The guildhouse hummed with activity over the following days. With the money they were making, it was possible to pay for labourers to perform minor repairs and upgrades to the guildhouse. Nathan walked the grounds, idly watching the men work from afar. Being out of the loop for so long, he felt disconnected from everything going on around him. Brohm insisted he relax, despite the fact he'd been doing nothing for months, and he felt useless with everyone around him busy with work.

As he rounded a corner of the guildhouse, sunlight glinting off the blade of a scythe caught his attention. He didn't know if they hired someone to take care of the grounds, but the sight of the tool was a perfect excuse to test his stamina.

The grass at the front of the guildhouse was well-maintained, but was growing unruly along the building's flanks and backyard. Using the length of the trimmed grass as a guide, he worked the scythe to cut a clean edge along the building. The smell of the grass invigorated him and brought a smile to his face. He could feel weakness in his muscles, but that was to be expected. The repeated movement of working the tool felt wonderful, and he was soon

covered with a sheen of sweat. Periodically, he would stop to look back at his work, trying his best to produce a four-metre-wide column of cut grass between the field and the edge of the building. Nodding with approval, he continued onward.

As he approached the back, the strikes of hammer on metal broke his trance. He poked his head around the corner to find the completed addition built over the winter. Zoe's smithy. He'd not seen her since he'd awoken from his long sleep. He dropped the scythe and wiped his brow, approaching the workshop. Peering in, he found her working on a piece of metal but couldn't tell what it was. Her back was toward him, and he didn't want to interrupt her work, so he waited patiently. It was a good excuse to take a break. After a few minutes of hammering the metal, she used tongs to carry it into a bucket of water. Violent steam rose as the metal cooled.

Nathan drew near. "Hey, Zoe."

She jumped at his voice and turned toward him.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to spook you."

She wore an illusive smile. "You've been a ghost for a while. I guess you spooking me is appropriate."

Nathan scoffed at her joke. "I hadn't seen you these past few days. You been busy?"

"Busy enough. I saw you before, but you were crowded by the rest of the gang, so I figured I'd wait until the dust settled—to say 'welcome back' when you could actually hear me."

Nathan nodded and gestured around himself. "You happy with the smithy?"

She put down the tongs. "Yeah. I've never worked in one built new, so it took time to break it in, so to speak. But being able to have everything where I want it? That's nice."

"Great. So what're you working—"

"How's the arm?" she asked.

Nathan gave her a bemused smile, realizing she had no interest in talking about her work. He lifted his sleeve to show the marks. "It's better, I guess."

"Has anyone filled you in on what's happening with those creatures that attacked us?"

Nathan shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"Ever since the warmer weather started, there've been more reports of sightings around Millsfield. They're more active at night, so attacks are rare, but no one has any idea where they're coming from."

Nathan's face reddened in frustration. "Sid didn't mention anything about this."

"I think he's just trying to keep things easy for you."

He scanned their surroundings to make sure no one was within earshot. "To be honest, I'm getting tired of being treated like a child."

"I respect that, but you have to admit everything you've been through is

pretty messed up." She gave him a quick once-over. "You seem fine, though, so maybe it's time to stand up for yourself."

"I'm already on it, but first I need to finish cutting the grass," he said, thumbing out the doorway.

"Have fun."

He headed out, beholden to the northern view. The long grass swayed gently, brushing against the treeline covering the ravine beyond, and crowned by the ice-peaked mountain range. It hadn't been a year since he and Brohm had travelled through the pass of those mountains, trying to escape what seemed like the world snapping at their heels. He took a deep, slow, cleansing breath and closed his eyes, feeling the sun on his skin. He'd never felt such safety before, hiding from the world with a name and face alien to him. But if he were being honest, a minuscule part of himself missed the chaos of his old life.

"Hey," Zoe called out.

Nathan pulled back from his thoughts and turned to find her wearing the faintest smile.

"Welcome back, Whitter."

* * *

Evening had fallen by the time Nathan completed the work to his satisfaction. His body ached, however the gratification of a job well done was more important than any pain he felt. Just as he finished raking the grass cuttings into a pile, Brohm arrived.

"I said to take it easy, yuh?" the big man said with a smirk.

"I was bored," Nathan said. "Anyway, it needed doing and it felt good."

Brohm surveyed the area and nodded. "Well, if it feels good, then I reckon it's okay."

Nathan gathered the tools and rested them against the side of the guildhouse. "Zoe mentioned the goblings are getting pretty bad. Why didn't you tell me?"

Brohm shrugged. "Not much anyone can do aside from killing 'em when they spot 'em. It's not like you were in a position to deal with it."

Nathan let out a curt sigh. "I'm not some invalid who needs to be taken care of."

"But days ago, you were!" An edge crept into Brohm's voice. "It's been five months. You can't expect me to treat you like normal just like that."

Nathan stared at the ground. He felt a fool. "You're right. I'm sorry." He placed a hand on Brohm's shoulder and squeezed it. "I don't think I even properly thanked you for watching over me all that time."

Brohm's expression softened. "You don't have to."

“But I do,” he said, looking into his eyes. “I know I keep repeating myself, but I can’t understand what I did in this life to deserve you.”

Brohm pulled him into a hug. “That goes both ways, l’il buddy.”

They held each other for a time, enjoying the simple pleasure of it. Then Nathan turned back to the northern view, accompanied by the whiff of cut grass. Sunlight shining this late in the day drew hard shadows, exposing fresh details in the mountain range. He could stand there for hours and still discover new features. Brohm, uninterested in the view, looked at Nathan from the corner of his eye. A curious frown crossed his face as he watched.

“Sorry for not telling you about the goblings,” he said. “It wasn’t on my mind. Anyway, it’s not like it’s our responsibility, yuh?”

“I guess since we were first to find them here, I feel somewhat responsible to find the source. I mean, we’re a part of the guild. It’s what we do.”

Brohm shrugged. “Dunno. Reckon dealing with that is bigger than just the two of us.”

“Hey, you two.” Leah approached, carrying a basket covered by a blanket. “I considered you might enjoy some time together outside. So I packed a picnic for your dinner.”

Nathan couldn’t help but laugh. “Leah, you’re so thoughtful.”

“It’s nothing special. I just whipped up a few sandwiches, grabbed a few apples, and Edgard baked some sugared biscuits earlier today, so I snuck in a bunch of those, too.”

Brohm let out a mirthful grunt of approval. “Thanks, Leah.”

She passed the basket to them with a beaming smile. “Enjoy your evening.”

Brohm watched her skip away. “I’ve never met anyone like her before. You?”

Nathan shook his head, smiling. “She’s definitely special.”

“You wanna sit here?” Brohm asked, gesturing to the freshly cut lawn.

“I have a better idea.”

Nathan took his hand and led him away from the guildhouse into the field of long grass. After a fair distance, Nathan set down the blanket to flatten the grass and sat down.

Brohm, a smirk on his face, peered around before sinking below the green horizon to join him. “Kinda private, yuh?”

Nathan winked. “That’s the idea.”

They ate in silence, enjoying each other’s company and the protective surroundings, even if it was just grass. Hidden from the world, it felt like they could’ve been anywhere. Maybe out on the road, in the middle of nowhere. All that mattered to Nathan was they were together, alone, away from the noise of the guildhouse.

“I realize it’s been months, but it still feels like everything that happened in Croydon was just a few days ago,” Nathan mused.

With his mouth full, Brohm just nodded.

Nathan continued. “What happened between us on the way there? You were keeping your distance from me . . . like you were afraid of me. Why?”

Brohm swallowed, looking down at his half-eaten sandwich. “That letter from Shaw really scared me.”

“I never got an answer about what it said. Shaw said something about knowing the truth?”

The big man sighed. “The letter said you might not be yourself ’cause of the bite on your arm, that you might try to kill me. It said you needed to go to Croydon for healers to look you over. But I couldn’t tell you anything because it might’ve sped up the disease, or whatever you wanna call it.”

Nathan shook his head. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know, but I didn’t wanna take any chances, yuh? Anyway, they were right. He told you the truth, and minutes later you went all wobbly.” He gazed into Nathan’s eyes. “As bad as it was between us, I’m glad I didn’t say anything. The idea of you attacking me, me having to defend myself . . . it reminded me of that cursed swamp we trudged through. I didn’t want that ever again, didn’t want either of us getting hurt. That was running through my head all those days on the road.”

Nathan let his words sink in. “You’re right. As bad as it was, you made the right call.”

They finished their meal in silence, each seemingly lost in their own thoughts. Nathan wanted to take back the conversation he’d initiated. All he yearned for was to enjoy this time with Brohm, and instead he was ruining it. He reached out and placed a hand on Brohm’s thigh. In return, the big man imparted an oddly shy smile.

“Even though we were together on that trip, it felt like we were apart,” Nathan said.

Brohm’s hand covered his. “I know you said it only felt like a few days for you, but it’s been months for me. I’ve . . .” he trailed off, his face blushing.

Nathan giggled. “What? Tell me.”

Brohm gave his crooked grin. “Even though you were here, it wasn’t really you.” He gestured to Nathan’s hand on his leg. “I missed this. I missed you.”

Nathan took the invitation and crawled over to him, gently pushing him onto his back. They held each other. No words were spoken. None were needed. Nathan’s head rested on Brohm’s chest, rising and falling like ocean waves. The rhythmic beat of his heart soothed him. The breeze returned, hypnotically swaying the grass around them.

He didn’t want this moment to end. It was perfection.

“I love you, Nathan.” Brohm’s voice was discreet, as though not wanting to spoil anything, but still needing to state the fact.

Nathan rose to hold Brohm’s cheek. “The gods know I love you, too.”

They kissed slowly, deeply, for an unknowable measure of time. The embrace tightened, fingers digging, their need growing. Brohm broke the kiss

and pawed at Nathan's shirt to remove it. With no grace, they pulled and tugged themselves free of their clothing. Brohm climbed atop him, his bulk holding him firm to the ground. And for hours into the late evening, they were one.

* * *

It was the middle of the night when Nathan woke from a half-remembered dream. Fleeting images of a magickal gateway surrounded by ethereal blue light. Red and purple sunkissed clouds overlooked mountainous, rust-coloured bluffs. It was beautiful, yet his heart filled with sorrow at its memory. He couldn't fathom why.

Brohm slept soundly at his side, one arm loosely holding him. Nathan's body ached from the exertion of the day, his muscles tense. He gently unwrapped himself from Brohm, then paced around the room, stretching his arms to ease the tension.

A symphony of night insects drifted in from the open window, and he sauntered toward it. The cool night air felt good on his skin. Peering outside revealed a clear sky twinkling with stars, the moon nearly full, illuminating the landscape with its bluish light.

He continued to stretch his muscles when the insects' song suddenly stopped in unison. Instead of silence, he heard what sounded like a flag whipping in the wind. Shivers ran down Nathan's spine. He'd heard that once before.

Resting his palms on the window sill, he craned his neck to look up at the sky. A gliding winged shape circled in a wide arc, silhouetted against the stars. Nathan rushed to Brohm, shaking him. The big man snorted awake, groaning at the intrusion.

"Wake up," Nathan said as loudly as he dared.

Brohm lifted himself up on one arm, grunting his disapproval again.

"There's something outside," Nathan continued. "I think it might be that daemon. The one that took me."

"Was a dream," he mumbled. It was clear he hadn't fully woken up yet.

Nathan rushed back to the window and looked again. The shape was gone. He leaned out farther, desperately scanning the sky. A brief flutter passed by, and the inky shape appeared again.

"You hear that? It's out there now," Nathan said.

"I heard something," Brohm replied, rising to join him.

Nathan pointed at the spot gliding steadily across the sky.

"What *is* that?" Brohm asked.

As though in response, the shape suddenly dived into the wooded ravine beyond the grass. Its shape was unmistakable—Nathan knew it was the

daemon. They both held their breath, waiting for it to emerge from the treeline. The silence held until the insects considered it safe enough to continue their song.

"What should we do?" Nathan asked.

Brohm padded to the wardrobe and donned his trousers. "We're gonna kill that thing. Consider it payback for trying to kill me last time."

"You can't kill it," Nathan said. "Trust me. I saw Helmsley's men rush that thing and their blades just bounced off its skin."

The big man let out a deep sigh. "What you reckon we do?"

Nathan considered their options. There weren't many. "What if we try . . . talking to it?"

"Are you nuts?" he roared.

Nathan shushed him. "You gotta understand that thing isn't what I expected. I never told you this, but after it took me, we had a . . . conversation."

Brohm stared at him incredulously as Nathan continued.

"It told me Helmsley had a hold over it somehow, and the only way to be free was to do his bidding. Its job was to find me. After that, it was free. That's when it killed Helmsley for trying to attack. I know this sounds crazy, but I think it felt sorry for me. It even apologized for hurting you."

Brohm laughed humourlessly. "You're right. That does sound crazy."

Returning to the window, Nathan peered outside. Nothing had changed.

"So what're we gonna do?" Brohm asked.

Nathan began dressing as he spoke. "I don't know about you, but if there's a daemon living in our backyard, I wanna resolve it."

With a lantern in hand, they snuck out of their bedroom and headed toward the stairs. Brohm's boots clomped on the wooden floor.

"Tread lightly," Nathan hissed.

"I'm trying," he grumbled under his breath.

They reached the common area without causing a commotion, and Brohm reached for his sword belt.

"I'm telling you, trying to attack it isn't going to work," Nathan said.

"Yuh, maybe so, but I'll still feel better wearing it," Brohm said, tightening it around his waist. "Anyway, you've got your dagger."

Nathan's hand touched the blade's scabbard, realizing he'd strapped it on while dressing without a thought. He offered Brohm a lame smile.

"Just keep your sword sheathed, okay?" he said. "I don't want to give this thing any excuse to attack."

Brohm opened the front door leading outside. "This is crazy."

They forded the river of grass behind the building, heading closer to the ravine. Nathan held the lit lantern, though it was shuttered so as not to bring them any undue attention. Both nervously kept an eye on the skies above and the trees ahead. Their weapons remained sheathed, but neither could stop themselves from resting a hand on the hilt.

The dark treeline loomed ahead of them, and Nathan opened the front shutters to light their way, but it did little to help. He led them while Brohm watched their rear. Very soon, the ground dipped, and they carefully treaded their way downward, deeper into the wood.

From their position, it was hard to know where the daemon had entered from above. No broken holes in the thick canopy yielded any clues. Even with the lantern's light shielded, their night vision was ruined. All they could perceive remained within a small radius of light ahead of them. Pitch blackness lay beyond.

They skidded down the steep ravine until reaching the bottom. A shallow stream greeted them, peppered with small rocks breaking its surface. They turned in all directions, attempting to pierce the darkness with the lantern, but it was no good.

"I'm going to douse the flame," Nathan whispered.

Brohm grunted furtively in acknowledgement, positioning himself to stand back to back with Nathan. They stood in the dark, waiting for their night vision to return, ears perked for any sound deemed unnatural. Nathan admitted to himself he was unsure about the plan, and now, standing in the gloam of night, he considered they'd made the wrong decision.

"You're right," he whispered to Brohm, "this *is* crazy."

A heavy crack to his left made him spin in that direction. Brohm pulled his sword free and stood at his side. In the distance, two red orbs glowed in the dark, moving in unison. Hulking footfalls crunched through fallen branches.

"Nathan," a voice called out, deep and reverberant.

Nathan knew the voice. It was impossible to mistake it for anything else. He wanted to run, but his legs refused to move.

"I still feel your presence," the voice continued.

The orbs approached closer, holding Nathan's gaze. He was terrified. Unable to take a breath.

Brohm pulled him away. "Forget this. Let's go!" he howled.

"No," the voice commanded. It was powerful, yet pleading. The red, burning eyes stopped moving forward. "I have come to you in search of aid."

Brohm stood motionless, but his hand still held Nathan's shoulder. After what felt like an eternity, Nathan took a breath of sweet, cool air.

"May I approach?" the voice asked.

Nathan squatted down and reached blindly for the lantern. He struck a spark to light the oiled wick, illuminating the ravine in a weak light. At its edge stood the daemon, nearly three metres tall. Lantern light reflected off its black, muscular form. It stepped forward, and both Nathan and Brohm scuttled back in reflex. Seeing this, the daemon raised its hands, palms outward, as a sign of peace. It hunched down in an attempt to lessen its threatening presence.

"I appreciate that the unpleasantness of our previous meeting has harmed

your trust in my word." It glanced at Brohm and then addressed Nathan again. "It pleases me to see your knight still lives. I had believed my actions had ended his life."

Nathan could only hold his breath.

"But please believe me," the daemon pleaded, "I wish you both no harm."

"What d'you want?" Brohm demanded, his sword still drawn. "Why'd you come here?"

It pointed at Nathan. "This human and I have a connection, brought about by a spelled ring he wore from the late Lord Helmsley. As bizarre as it may be, Nathan is the only man I can trust."

Brohm stepped forward, trying to shield Nathan. "Well, that's too bad. He doesn't trust you."

Nathan opened his mouth to say otherwise, but then shut it abruptly. He didn't want Brohm to think the daemon had a hold over him, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't trust it.

The daemon's eyes remained on Nathan. "I see you have shielded your appearance to hide your real self—"

Nathan jumped forward to interrupt it. "Don't say anything. It might break the . . ."

He trailed off, not wanting to complete the sentence. The witch, Morgana, stated the magick hiding their appearance could be broken by merely talking about it. She'd been vague on the rules, so Nathan and Brohm agreed to never speak of it, ever.

A guttural laugh emanated from deep within the daemon's chest. "Yes, I see your concern. A strange design. Fragile."

Nathan touched his face absentmindedly. "So you recognize us? You can see past the mask?"

"Indeed," it replied.

"Where have you been all this time?" Nathan asked.

"I hid amongst the vast, empty tracts of land. I admit our connection kept me near to you. It is a strange pull. Somehow reassuring."

Nathan found this knowledge unsettling, but kept silent while the daemon continued.

"Then the lands grew cold. Snow began to accumulate. I found this unappealing and travelled south, remaining there for a time. Now, I return to you. The pull beckons."

Brohm had lowered his guard, but the sword remained in hand. "So what kinda help you need?"

The daemon peered at the canopy above. "I am trapped in this realm, unwelcome by its denizens. I wish to return home."

Nathan stepped to Brohm's side, giving him a bewildered glance before addressing the daemon. "You make it sound like a simple ask. What would we know about opening a doorway to the hells?"

Brohm scoffed. "Better question: why would we?"

The daemon's eyes, glowing red, had no pupils. Despite that, it was obvious its gaze shifted between the two men, as though searching for an answer that would satisfy them. Its chest grew as it took a deep breath, letting it out as a sigh.

"I am aware of your concept of trade. I regret to inform you that I have nothing to bestow in return for your aid. But I have heard your kind do offer services freely in times of need." It bowed before them. "I am in need. I humbly request your assistance."

Neither of them knew how to respond to such a deferential act from such a frightening beast. Nathan took one tentative step forward.

"But we don't know how to help you. Do you know what's involved in opening a portal?"

The daemon returned to sitting on its haunches, shaking its head. "I do not."

Nathan looked back to Brohm. The tip of his sword was now resting on the forest floor, forgotten. The big man shrugged his shoulders.

The daemon spoke again. "Aside from my own desire to return home, I believe there is a reason that would benefit you and your kind. Due to my presence here, I have witnessed small tears in the fabric of your realm. From these tears, iratxos come."

"Iratxos? What are those?" Nathan asked nervously.

"They skulk in the shadows. I have tried to cull them, but there are many."

Brohm raised a hand. "Wait. You talking about green things with lots of teeth."

"A crude description, but yes, those are iratxos."

Nathan pulled up his sleeve to show the scar on his arm. "One of those things bit me."

Suddenly, the daemon rose and leapt toward him, closing the gap between them with frightening speed. Nathan stumbled back in reflex, tripping over his own feet in the process. Before he could roll back to safety, he was caught by giant clawed hands. The point of Brohm's sword snapped up, trained on the daemon.

"Let him go!" Brohm bellowed.

It immediately complied, gently setting Nathan down on his feet. "My apologies. I forget that my actions, when misunderstood, cause fear among humans."

"You forgot?" Brohm's voice had its familiar edge. "You forgot you're a *monster*?"

If it was pained by Brohm's slight, it showed no reaction. "I was only concerned for your friend. The bite of the iratxo can be deadly." It turned its attention back to Nathan. "May I inspect the wound?"

While Nathan held out his arm, Brohm continued his tirade. "So you're the one to blame for these things attacking people? And Nathan was all messed up for five months 'cause of that bite."

The daemon spoke while examining Nathan's arm. "I understand your anger, but please remember that my being here was not by choice. It was one of your own kind who brought me here."

Brohm didn't have a snappy quip in response, so he rolled his eyes instead.

"As it healed, did you ever feel pain in your arm, or around your chest?" it asked Nathan.

"No," he lied, swallowing a lump in his throat.

"Very good. Then you were able to fight the toxin."

"Of course he's okay," Brohm said. "If someone's poisoned, they'd be dead by now."

"The toxin of the iratxo is quite slow to react and has multiple stages."

Nathan pulled down his sleeve, feeling faint at the prospect he may not be alright. The daemon sat down again, looking back and forth between them.

"If you are unwilling to aid me in returning home, consider your fellow humans. The tears in your realm will continue until I return to where I belong."

Brohm let out a sigh. "Look, you make a good argument, yuh? But . . ."

Nathan finished Brohm's sentence. "We don't know how to help you get home. We don't know anyone who has knowledge to open portals to the hells. Gods, it would be ridiculous if we did."

"Would you be willing to enquire?" it asked.

Brohm chuckled. "I don't think you understand what you're asking for. These aren't normal questions someone asks. If the wrong people hear, reckon we'd get in trouble."

It nodded. "I understand your hesitancy."

"Give us time to think about it," Nathan said. "But how do we find you if we figure something out?"

"I can return to this spot each night."

"I don't think it's a good idea to land here every night. What if we leave some kind of signal instead?"

"What do you propose?"

Brohm chimed in. "What if we leave a lantern in the window?"

"Yeah. The top floor window, rear of the building," Nathan said. "If you see it lit, it means we have news. Otherwise, just fly by."

"This is an agreeable arrangement. Very well. Until the next we meet, I bid you goodnight," it said, rising to its full height.

"Wait," Nathan said. "What's your name?"

The daemon smiled to reveal terrifically sharp teeth. "You would not be able to pronounce it."

"Well, we need to call you something. We can't just call you *daemon*."

"It is as acceptable a name as any," it said.

"Hold on! You took the body of Helmsley's alchemist, Theodrik. He knew how to open portals. He's the one who brought you here. Is

he . . . trapped inside you?" Nathan cringed at the prospect. "Is it possible you have his knowledge?"

The daemon shook its head. "The human alchemist, Theodrik, was destroyed in the process of summoning me. But you may use that name if you wish."

"Theodrik the daemon, huh?" Brohm said. "Sure, why not. Don't reckon this night can get any weirder—"

The snap of a branch from behind interrupted him. Nathan shone the lantern in that direction. They couldn't discern anything, but from the sound of the scrambling, they'd frightened whoever was there.

"It would appear you have company," the daemon stated. "We shall meet again." It leaped in the air, massive leathery wings outstretched, beating bursts of air onto them.

Nathan and Brohm gave chase, using exposed tree roots for purchase to scale the ravine. Despite the head start, whoever was ahead was less adept at climbing, and they were catching up. The man reached the plateau and ran headlong into the grass toward the guildhouse. Nathan, being the more agile of the two, left Brohm behind. He dropped the lantern at the edge of the ravine and closed the distance on his prey. The man knew he was losing the race, spitting out breathless, panicked cries. It only took mere moments until Nathan was close enough to tackle him.

The man let out another cry of fear before finally forming coherent words. "P-please, please! Don't hurt me," he managed through ragged gasps.

"Cormac?" Nathan cried.

Brohm had to practically drag the old monk back to the relative privacy of the ravine. They had to be sure no one else from the guildhouse might hear the outcome, whatever that might be. Nathan hadn't decided yet.

The monk muttered in broken sentences, mostly platitudes spoken by someone thinking they were about to be murdered. Once they reached the treeline, Brohm shoved the man to the ground. Despite not having the lantern, the moon provided enough light to read his expression.

"Please, Whitter, Sid. I won't speak a word to anyone. 'Tis a promise I made to you before and intend to keep," he said, groveling at their feet.

"Gods damn it, Cormac," Nathan said. "Why'd you have to stick your nose where it didn't belong?"

"I heard you two from my bedroom. I was curious what you were up to in the dead of night. I assumed you were heading to Millsfield, but when I saw you walking beyond the house . . ."

"He knows too much," Brohm grumbled. "He knows too much about everything—about us."

Cormac shuffled closer on his knees. "I tried my best to earn your trust—"

"Yuh, well, Whitter might trust you. But me?" Brohm shook his head.

Nathan gently nudged Brohm aside and crouched down to face the monk directly. "What did you see? What did you hear?"

Cormac nervously glanced between the two men, unsure how to respond.

"Answer him," Brohm growled.

"I saw something. 'Twas big. Some sort of . . . monster? You were talking, but I couldn't distinguish the words."

"That's it?" Nathan asked.

Cormac nodded rapidly. "But, what was that thing? How—"

Brohm kicked the monk in the ribs. "You never know when to fucking stop asking questions, do you?"

Cormac grunted as he fell to his side, hands held up pathetically in defence. Nathan immediately positioned himself to stop Brohm from continuing the assault on the old man.

"Let me take care of this," he whispered to Brohm.

"No!" Brohm yelled. He didn't seem to care who heard them now. "I'm tired of this guy. I don't trust him." He turned his attention back to Cormac. "Why are you so damn chummy with us?"

Cormac suddenly broke down in tears, sobbing. Brohm let out a frustrated sigh, but Nathan was concerned. These weren't cries of pain. After a few moments, Cormac managed to speak, albeit with a shaky voice.

"I haven't been completely honest with you two." He took a deep, shuddering breath to steady himself. "I'm helping you seek redemption because . . . I need to believe it's possible. If you can be redeemed, then I can, too."

"Why? What'd you do?" Brohm asked.

Cormac wiped his eyes and replied gravely. "I've committed a cardinal sin: murder."

"What?" Nathan blurted out.

"It was an accident, but . . . I murdered a fellow monk."

"How?" Nathan asked.

Cormac fell to sobbing again, but Brohm wasn't moved to compassion.

"Okay. So, you killed someone. How does talking to us make it better?"

When Cormac didn't answer, Nathan spoke. "Guys, it's the middle of the night. Can't say how much sleep we're gonna get at this point, but let's deal with this in the morning."

"No way," Brohm said. "What if he talks?"

Nathan gestured to the pitiful display before them. "He's not going to talk. Are you, Cormac?"

The monk settled enough to grant a slow shake of his head in response.

"There, you see?" Nathan said. "Let's go."

He took Brohm by the arm to lead him back to the house. The big man came willingly, leaving the monk behind. No words were spoken while they walked side by side through the long grass. Nathan couldn't fathom what they were going to do next, and he assumed Brohm felt the same.

They returned to their bedroom and undressed. Brohm flopped forward onto the bed, face-planting into the pillow. He let out a frustrated moan.

Nathan murmured in agreement, sidled up beside him, and wrapped an arm across his back.

Brohm turned his head to face him. “Just when things were almost normal . . .”

“I know,” Nathan nearly whispered. “Why’s it gotta be so hard?”

His mind raced at everything they’d learned in such a short time. He took a few deep breaths to try and relax, to clear his head, but he knew it wouldn’t be that easy. He focused his thoughts on Brohm, their hidden refuge in the grass, the warm sunlight, their brief time together when all was at peace. The memory was delicate, but he held onto it tightly, replaying the moment until sleep finally took hold.

* * *

Nathan woke from a gentle nudge, finding Brohm’s face nearly filling his vision.

“Wakey, wakey,” he said in a flat tone.

Nathan rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “What time is it?”

Brohm, already dressed, stood up. “Dunno. Late? Let’s get some breakfast before we figure out what we’re doing.”

The memory of last night slapped Nathan across the face, and he groaned, wanting to forget it all.

Downstairs, the common room was empty, much to Nathan’s delight. Edgard still had warm leftovers from the morning meal and set two plates out for them. They ate without a word, lost in their own thoughts. Nathan didn’t want to talk about the inevitable, and presumed Brohm felt similarly, yet was proven wrong when the big man broke the silence.

“What’re we gonna do about Cormac?”

Nathan looked up from his plate, offering a hopeful expression. “Nothing?”

Brohm shook his head in disappointment. “Why do you trust him?”

“He’s never given us a reason not to. His words, his actions. I can’t find a fault to judge him poorly.”

“He’s so nosy, though.”

Nathan managed a smile. “You’re not wrong.”

Brohm finished his last forkful of eggs and pushed the plate away. “What about the daemon—I mean, Theodrik?”

“I’ve no idea who could possibly help us open a door to the hells.” Speaking it aloud felt so ridiculous to Nathan.

“Reckon the guild’s gotta have some connections. At least point us in the right direction, yuh?”

Nathan shook his head. “We can’t tell them anything.”

"Why?"

"How are we going to explain our connection to Theodrik? *Oh, some daemon decided to come visit and say hello?*"

Brohm's eyes darted about as he contemplated the outcome. "Right," he drawled. "Damn."

"Yeah. We gotta find someone who won't ask questions but give us answers we need." Nathan considered everyone he knew in his old life, but only one person came to mind. "What about Morgana?"

Brohm's reaction was immediate. "No! No way."

"Why not?"

"There's no chance we're walking in that haunted swamp again. Twice we did, and twice I regretted it."

"What if I went alone?"

Brohm slammed the table with a fist. "No! Being there alone? Who knows what would happen. You'd get lost. Probably kill yourself."

"But she's the only person we know who'd have any idea—" Brohm's stare stopped him cold, and Nathan raised a hand to calm him. "Okay, big guy. I hear you. Morgana's off the list."

Nathan continued to contemplate in silence, but his mind was blank of anyone who could aid them.

"What about that healer," Brohm said. "The one that helped the bite on your arm."

"Lorne? What could a healer know about opening portals?"

Brohm shrugged. "Dunno. But he's close by. Couldn't hurt to try."

"You think he'd be able to keep his mouth shut?"

"Reckon he keeps to himself. That was my impression, at least."

Nathan stood. "It's as good a start as any. Let's go."

Late morning sun warmed their faces as they rode their horses through Millsfield. They took the south route out of town, but beyond that, the exact location of the healer's shack was clouded by time. Not helping matters, the shift of seasons—from winter to spring—altered the look of their surroundings. They approached a copse of conifers, and Nathan gestured toward a faint footpath flanked by low boughs.

"Is this it?" Brohm asked.

Nathan dismounted and peered into the shadowed pines. "I was hoping you'd remember better. I was out of it last time we were here." He caught himself unconsciously rubbing the old bite on his arm.

They led their horses through the trees. This time, instead of snow drifts, their passage was impeded by tenacious undergrowth. Brohm pointed ahead as he caught sight of the small hut, camouflaged amid the brush. They tied their horses to a tree and advanced upon the simple home, the loam underfoot quietening their steps. Nathan gently rapped at the door. There was no answer, and no sound of movement from within. He knocked again, harder this time.

"Hello? Lorne, you home?"

An annoyed cry emerged from inside, followed by muttering and shuffling steps approaching the door. The healer appeared, a scowl on his face. What little hair left on his head was in disarray.

"You enjoy waking people from their nap?"

"Sorry," Nathan said. "We had . . . uh, no way of knowing."

Brohm chimed in, a friendly smirk on his face. "Maybe you could put a sign on your door, yuh? It could say: *Napping. Bug me later.*"

Nathan elbowed Brohm in the ribs. Lorne rolled his eyes and fixed his hair with his fingers.

"Well, I'm up now. What can I do you for?"

The simple query caught Nathan off-guard, realizing he'd never contemplated how to ask such a bizarre and potentially dangerous question.

"Um, we're looking for information. It's of a sensitive nature. We're not even sure if you'd have the answer."

Lorne just stared at him. "Well? I'm not getting any younger."

Nathan laughed nervously in spite of himself, glancing at Brohm in hopes he'd take over, but all eyes were on him. "Okay, I guess I'll just spit it out. Do you know how to open a portal . . . to the hells?"

Lorne's stare morphed into a scrutinizing gaze. Wanting to avoid his piercing eyes, Nathan stared at the ground.

"Say again?" the old man asked.

Still unwilling to look up, an awkward smile crossed Nathan's face. "It's just what I said. You didn't mishear me."

Understandably suspicious, Lorne glared at him from the corner of his eye. "Why would you want to do such a thing?"

"Can we come inside?" Nathan asked. "We can explain everything if you're willing to listen."

Lorne's gaze shifted between the two of them before speaking. "Very well."

He turned and ushered them in with a wave of his hand. They stepped inside and closed the door. Lorne sat at a table and gestured toward wooden chairs.

"Do you recognize us?" Brohm asked as they sat down. "My name's Sid. You helped my buddy, Whitter, last winter. He had a bite on his arm."

Nathan pulled back his sleeve to show the scars. Lorne retrieved a lit candle from the table, inspected his arm, then nodded.

"I do. You said it was—what—a wolf bite? I know the shape of many different bites, and that wasn't caused by an animal."

"That's why we're looking for help," Nathan said. "It's about—"

"Hold on," Brohm said. "We need to know you'll keep this to yourself, yuh?"

The healer cocked his head slightly. "Why is that?"

"The less people know, the better," Nathan said. "We don't want to cause any fear within the community. We're hoping your word will be good enough

to trust."

Lorne stood up straight in his seat. "Of course my word is good. But you realize what you're asking is very suspect."

"We do," Nathan said. "That's why we want to keep this quiet. So, do you know anything about opening portals?"

He crossed his arms. "Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't."

Nathan raised a hand, hoping Brohm wouldn't interject. He was learning those kinds of responses caused Brohm's anger to simmer.

"We're hoping once we explain our reasons, you'll understand we're not doing this for nefarious purposes. Are you aware of creatures that were sighted in the south during the winter, and appearing in Millsfield now that the warm weather has returned?"

Lorne stared at him through slitted eyes. "I've heard things, yes."

Nathan pointed at his arm. "That's what bit me last winter. You were right. It wasn't a wolf."

"Of course I was right."

"The Adventurer's Guild calls them goblings, but we've discovered their true name: iratxos."

Lorne bolted out of his seat. "Very few know that word. Where have you heard it?"

Unease fluttered in Nathan's belly. He weighed the risk of telling this man he barely knew a dangerous truth or allowing these creatures to continue terrorizing the countryside.

"We heard it spoken from the source of the problem. A daemon is in our world, trapped here."

Lorne stood wide-eyed before them. "You've spoken to it! Are you mad?"

"Its presence has caused rifts to appear. Those creatures, iratxos, are using them to travel here. If the daemon returns to the hells, the rifts will stop opening."

They allowed the healer time to absorb what they were saying. Judging by his expression, he needed it.

Lorne spoke with great clarity. "You can *never* trust a daemon."

"I would've agreed with you before we met it," Nathan said. "I know this sounds crazy, but . . . it just wants to go home."

Lorne scoffed. "You're right. It's crazy. The daemon is just deceiving you to bring more of its kind here."

"It's not like that. It might be terrifying to look at, but its manner is almost . . . human."

"Perhaps you've been bewitched, then. I told you: you can never trust a daemon."

Shaking his head, Nathan looked over to Brohm. "This is pointless."

The big man rose from his chair and pointed a finger at Lorne. "Not a word to anyone. Got it?"

They'd reached the door, but just as Brohm was about to open it, Lorne hollered.

"Hold!"

Both men shook in surprise at the sudden outburst, and cast a glance back at the healer. Lorne gestured woodenly for them to sit down again. Reluctantly, they did as they were bidden.

"I'm leery of you two, but if you insist on this fool's expedition, I want someone I can trust to take the reins."

"Who?" Brohm asked.

"A woman, a scholar well-versed in all things beyond the veil. Her name is Rabiah Charters."

"Where can we find her?" Nathan asked.

"It's been an age, but I believe she's a permanent resident at Oaksgate University in Etton Crossing, east of here. Are you familiar with the city?"

Brohm shook his head.

"I've heard it in passing, but never been there," Nathan said.

"If anyone will have the answers you seek, she is the one." He chuckled to himself. "But I'll give a fair warning. Asking for help won't be easy. She'll think you're wasting her time."

Before they could respond, he shuffled to a cabinet. Mumbling, he searched through a disorganized mess to retrieve paper, a quill, and a stoppered jar of ink. Returning, he wiped a few crumbs from the table before sitting.

Brohm caught Nathan's eye with a questioning glance, and he returned it with a faint shrug. They watched on as the old man penned a letter, the harsh scratches of quill on paper filling the room. Only a few lines were written before he signed it, blowing gently to dry the ink as he reviewed it. After neatly folding the note, Lorne glanced at the burning candle. With a groan, he rose to return to the cabinet, digging deeper this time. The muttering continued as he pushed items aside. After opening a small drawer, he found what he was looking for.

"I haven't needed this in a while," he said, holding a short metal rod.

It wasn't until he returned that Nathan recognized it as a small wax stamp. Lorne tipped the candle, pooling wax over the letter. He sealed it and then handed it to Nathan.

"There you go."

Nathan took it. "I'm sorry, but . . . what is this?"

"Your recommendation, of course, as well as a brief on your situation. Be sure to hand that to her quickly. And *don't* waste her time. She doesn't suffer fools well." Lorne's expression turned dire. "I can't stress this enough. Follow her instructions implicitly. If she doesn't agree to help you, do not attempt anything on your own. Daemons are not to be trifled with. I don't care if you think its request is benevolent, there's no guarantee of anything. What it asks for could be a trap."

Brohm was nodding as the healer spoke. “Yuh, I don’t really trust it, either.”

“Good. Use that mistrust to your advantage.” He pointed to Nathan. “If you find him acting strangely or agreeing to things you don’t believe to be proper, you must stop him.”

Forlorn doubt overtook Brohm’s features—an expression Nathan had never seen before—and he suddenly felt on trial, trying to prove his innocence.

“I will,” Brohm said with determination, only adding to Nathan’s concern. “And you promise not to repeat this to anyone, yuh?”

“Of course not,” Lorne replied, as though it were obvious.

Brohm shook his hand, gave his thanks, and headed outside. After breaking free of the terrible sensation in his gut, Nathan held up the letter.

“Thank you for doing this. We appreciate your help.”

Lorne nodded, locking eyes with him again. “Be careful.”

“We will.”

The healer shut the door while Nathan inspected the letter. The seal consisted of an unadorned design: a bird, perhaps a seagull. Despite its simplicity, it felt inexplicably important.

* * *

Upon reaching the guildhouse, Nathan remained haunted by Brohm’s icy reply to Lorne’s warning. They stabled their horses, but before leaving the outbuilding, Nathan stopped Brohm.

“You trust me, don’t you?” he asked.

Brohm appeared confused. “Yuh. Why you ask me that?”

“Back there, you said you’d stop me if I did anything strange.”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Sure. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“But you seemed so serious.”

“This *is* serious.”

Nathan felt like he was losing the thread of the argument he was trying to make. “I know, but . . . sorry, you made this face and I got this pit of the stomach feeling and I don’t know—”

He couldn’t continue because Brohm had pulled him into a hug, mashing Nathan’s face against his chest.

“I’m scared too, l’il buddy,” Brohm said fervently. “I’d never be able to do any of this without you.”

Nathan held on tight, turning his head enough to speak. “Me neither.”

“But to answer your question: yuh, of course I trust you. I just don’t trust that daemon.”

Nathan nodded against his chest.

"Reckon we need to decide what to do about Cormac, too," Brohm said.

"Have you seen him since last night?"

"No."

Nathan cursed under his breath and bolted across the guildhouse's courtyard, up the steps of the veranda, and through the front door. In the common area, he found some of the men eating lunch. A cursory scan revealed no sign of the monk. He approached Leah.

"Have you seen Cormac?"

She held a finger to her chin as she thought. "Actually, now that you mention it, no, I've not seen him today. That's weird."

He quickly thanked her before she finished speaking and then hurried upstairs. Upon reaching Cormac's bedroom, he yanked the door latch and pushed hard, causing the door to swing open and slam against the wall. A blanketed lump on the bed jumped in surprise. Cormac lifted his head from his pillow, fear painted on his face at the sight of Nathan, with Brohm now looming behind him.

Nathan let out a sigh of relief and stepped into the room. "We thought you left."

Cormac cowered behind his sheet for protection. "I will. Certainly, I will."

"No, that's not what I meant."

Brohm closed the door behind him, grabbed a chair from the corner, turned it around and sat, leaning forward on the backrest.

"We need to talk, Cormac." Brohm's voice held its dangerous edge again.

"Please. I told you your secrets are safe. 'Tis a promise."

"We'll be sure of that 'cause you're coming with us."

Nathan turned to Brohm. "What?"

"Where are you taking me?" Cormac asked meekly.

"Some city called Etton Crossing," Brohm replied. "It's against my better judgement, but reckon it's the best choice we got."

Nathan pulled Brohm from the chair and spoke under his breath. "Can I speak to you outside?"

They stepped into the hallway and spoke in hushed tones.

"When were you planning on telling me this plan?" Nathan asked.

Brohm laid a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, I just made it up now."

Nathan gaped at him. "He's not our prisoner. If he wants to leave, that's his choice."

"He made his choice when he spied on us. He knows too much. He's in too deep now."

Nathan raked fingers through his hair. "We have to give him a choice. We can't *force* him to come."

The big man considered his words. With a deep sigh, he entered Cormac's room again. The monk sat on the bed, dressing himself. Brohm took his place back on the chair with Nathan at his side.

“Okay, so, Whitter makes a good point. We can’t force you to go anywhere. But you know too much to just walk away.”

Cormac glanced at both of them, nervous about what that meant.

“As much as I hate to do this, we’re gonna tell you everything,” Brohm continued. “Well, not everything. But enough for you to understand why we gotta go to Etton Crossing.”

He explained the source of the iratxos being caused by the daemon, Theodrik; why they anticipated the guild’s involvement would result in too many questions about Nathan’s past; and how they hoped Rabiah Chambers at Oaksgate University would be able to help them. Cormac sat silently while they spoke, never interrupting or asking for more details.

“I never thought to ask until now,” Nathan said, “but do you know anything about daemons?”

Cormac was still processing everything he’d been told, and was slow to reply. “No. Only that they’re devious creatures. Are you sure this thing is telling you the truth?”

Nathan scrubbed his face with a hand. “I thought so, but honestly, I’m second-guessing myself now.”

“Then I’ll aid you on your quest,” Cormac said resolutely. “It’s a worthy goal. One that could save many lives.”

Hearing it spoken aloud, Nathan wasn’t sure they were the right people for the job, but given the circumstances, he knew they had to try.

“Thank you.”

“We could also continue our private talks,” Cormac said.

“No,” Brohm interjected. “Whitter, you can do whatever you want, but I’m done with those.”

Nathan nodded, but felt a pang of despondence. He’d hoped their talks would’ve helped Brohm combat his anger, or at least lessen its severity.

“When do we leave?” Cormac asked.

“We need to tell Theodrik the plan,” Nathan said.

“Do we?” Brohm asked. “Reckon the less it knows, the better.”

Cormac murmured in agreement.

“It’s expecting some kind of response,” Nathan said. “If we leave for the city and discover a solution, how will we find Theodrik again?”

Brohm offered a sidelong glance. “It found you already. Remember, it said you were connected somehow. Maybe it’ll follow you.”

“What if we tell it, but keep the details light,” Nathan said. “Just say we’re heading to the city. That’s all.”

Cormac waited a moment before chiming in. “A reasonable compromise, wouldn’t you agree?”

Brohm exhaled forcefully through his nose. “Fine. We’ll get supplies readied today, signal it tonight, and leave at first light.” He rose from the chair, staring at Cormac. “Don’t make me regret getting you involved.”

Cormac gently rubbed his ribs, grimacing in pain. “You made yourself

crystal clear last night, Sid. I won't let you down."

"You better not. That kick's nothing compared to what I can *really* do."

He stormed out of the room and slammed the door shut. Nathan's face heated in reaction to Brohm's attitude.

"I apologize about all this, Cormac. He means well, but he's . . ."

"Protective?"

Nathan shrugged.

"You have a powerful ally and friend. 'Tis a shame his fury is triggered so easily."

"That's one way of putting it. I'm sorry about him kicking you—"

Cormac waved away his concern. "I'll live."

An awkward silence fell between them. Nathan wanted to ask about Cormac's claim of guilt the night before—murdering one of his fellow monks—but knew time was short. He'd have to wait another day.

"Okay, I'm going to ask if anyone knows the way to Etton Crossing," Nathan said. "I've an idea where it is but never been there."

Cormac offered a knowing smile in response. "'Twould seem my joining you is fortuitous. I can be your guide."

"You know the way?"

The monk raised his eyebrows. "Indeed."

"Do you know how long it'd take to get there by horseback?"

Cormac counted silently on his fingers as he considered the question. "Possibly a fortnight? There are too many variables to make a good guess."

"That's fine. It's enough to give me an idea." Nathan opened the door to leave. "Be ready to head out tomorrow morning. We'll have a spare horse for you to ride."

Cormac bowed his head. "It shall be an honour to be part of your team."

* * *

Nathan returned downstairs to find the lunch crowd had grown, but it was easy enough to spot Brohm and Leah standing near the doorway to the kitchen. As he neared them, Leah beamed at him with fervour.

"Sid tells me you two are on an adventure."

Nathan laughed weakly. "An adventure? I don't know about that." He glanced at Brohm. The anger from earlier had disappeared. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed Leah had a calming effect on him, and Nathan wished she was the one joining them instead.

"Oh, I have something for you, Sid. I'll get it later," she said.

Brohm bashfully scratched the back of his neck. "Yuh? What is it?"

"It's just a little something. You'll see." A bell rang from the kitchen. "Oop, that's me. I'll see you boys later."

She scurried past them through the swinging door, emerging moments later with a tray of food in hand.

Nathan pulled Brohm aside. “You all good, big guy?”

He nodded.

“It turns out Cormac knows the way to Etton Crossing,” Nathan said, “so that’s one thing crossed off our list.”

The mention of the monk’s name darkened Brohm’s expression again. “Good. At least he’ll be worth something.”

Nathan took his hand and pulled him to the relative privacy under the stairwell. “Why do you hate him so much?”

He stared at the ceiling and let out a sigh. “Where do I start?”

“The beginning.”

Brohm held up his index finger. “We see him around town. Some creepy beggar on the street telling us we’re evil or something. What’s that about?”

His middle finger rose. “He conveniently finds you in the middle of the night after you dealt with Tarn. ‘Helps’ you get home. Meanwhile, I’m worried sick about you at our apartment. I never should’ve left you that night.”

“But I told you to leave—”

Brohm ignored him, adding a ring finger to the count. “He barges into this place in the middle of a blizzard, taking advantage of his ‘good will’ to get closer to you. Get between *us*.”

“Wait, what?”

His little finger sprung up. “He gets us talking about stuff that’s nobody’s business but our own. I still don’t reckon how he managed that, and I hate myself for letting my guard down.”

Finally, his thumb completed the score. “Last night, he follows us and sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong. *That’s* why I don’t trust him. *That’s* why I hate him.”

Luckily, Brohm managed to keep his voice under control, falling under the hubbub of the men chatting at the tables. Nathan was speechless and could only watch Brohm smoulder, his chest rising and falling with each angry breath.

“Does that clear things up?” Brohm asked.

“Are you jealous?” Nathan immediately regretted asking that aloud.

“What? Why would you ask that?” Brohm stumbled over his words, his face reddening more so.

“That night. You’re upset *he* was with me, instead of you?”

The rim of Brohm’s eyes turned glassy. Hiding his face, he pushed past and headed for the front door. Nathan followed, reaching out for him, ignoring the confused looks of the guild members.

“Wait, come back.”

Ignoring his plea, Brohm ran outside. Nathan reached the threshold, finding the big man stumble around the corner of the building, hands to his

face to stifle a sob. The sight staggered Nathan like a punch to the face. He followed, peering around the corner to find Brohm collapsed to his knees on the lawn, his shoulders jerking with each sob. Nathan ran and knelt down beside him.

"I'm sorry, Brohm," he whispered. "I didn't realize how much it upset you."

Brohm steadied his breathing before trying to speak. "The night I forced you to kill Tarn, I told myself it was for our protection. But really, I did it 'cause I was mad at you. It was your fault we got into that mess."

Nathan let out a deep sigh. "I know."

"You pushed me away that night, and I deserved it. But after you were gone, I reckoned that was the end for us. I was so happy to be wrong when I found you the next morning. But when you told me later that Cormac was there that night, I felt betrayed. I should've been the one there for you. I don't want anyone else to take my place."

Nathan rested his head on Brohm's shoulder. "No one could replace you, ever. I don't know how to express it any simpler than that."

Brohm wiped his nose and took another shuddering breath. "So, yuh, reckon I am jealous. I dunno what's wrong with me."

"Nothing's wrong with you."

"It feels like I'm always letting you down. Always getting angry at the stupidest things."

Nathan rubbed his back to soothe him. "The first days we were together, I'll admit I found your anger frightening yet attractive at the same time."

"What? Why?"

"It's hard to explain, but I've discovered that ferocity controls all your emotions, including your passion."

"Yuh?" His voice rose slightly.

Nathan muttered his assent, gently kissing his neck. "But you're right. Your anger can flare up a little too easily, but it's who you are. I love you for it. All I can ask is you try to keep it in check, and only unleash it when we really need it."

Brohm turned and wrapped his arms around Nathan. "I'll try. I will. I promise"

"I know." Nathan held him close. "But please, try not to be too angry with Cormac, okay?"

Brohm nodded his head against him, letting out a sigh. "Reckon it'd make a pretty terrible trip if I didn't let it go."

They sat together, allowing time to wipe their eyes and gather their wits. Nathan regretted hurting Brohm with his callous words, but was gratified to fully understand Brohm's hostility toward Cormac. With the truth out in the open, perhaps Brohm could free himself of the jealousy he felt. The concept was strange to consider at first. How could Brohm be jealous of a helpful monk? But Nathan supposed it was all part of his protective nature. How

could he fault him for that?

Guild members crossed the courtyard, readying their mounts to head back to their assigned tasks. Nathan and Brohm waited until they left. They had no interest in attempting an explanation for their dramatic and embarrassing departure. Once the guildhouse was empty, they headed to the kitchen and toward Iain's office. Nathan knocked at the door.

"Enter," came Iain's voice in reply.

They did so, nodding in greeting.

"Whitter, Sid. What can I do for you?"

Nathan stepped forward. "We're heading out for an indeterminate amount of time and need funds from our personal account."

"Very well." Iain pushed aside the book he was using and opened a drawer to retrieve a near-identical book. Using a ribbon bookmark, he opened it and scanned down to the final entry. "You have a sizable amount. How much do you need?"

"All of it."

Iain nearly choked. "I don't think you realize how much coin you possess."

Nathan glanced between Iain and Brohm in confusion. "How much are we talking about?"

Iain cleared his throat. "After taxes and guild deductibles, you have nearly ten thousand in silver, as well as over a thousand in gold coin."

Now it was Nathan's turn to choke. Brohm approached the desk, turning his head in an attempt to make sense of the numbers in the ledger.

"How'd we make so much?" Brohm asked.

"This branch has done quite well for itself," Iain said. "I explained this to you earlier, but I suppose I didn't explain it clearly enough."

Brohm gestured at the book. "You never told me numbers."

"No, I suppose I didn't. My apologies. But you understand now why you can't take it all."

A laugh escaped Nathan. "Yeah, no kidding."

Brohm wore a bemused grin, his eyes out of focus as he considered the possibilities all that coin could provide.

Iain stared at them expectantly. "Well? How much would you like to withdraw?"

Nathan scratched the back of his head. "Two hundred silver?"

Ian scoffed. "I won't begin to guess what you need this for, but going out on the road with two hundred is ill-advised. Will one hundred suffice?"

Nathan shrugged. "Sure?"

Iain scribbled a new entry into the ledger, then glanced up, noting their hands were empty. "How do you plan on carrying this coin? Do you have a lockbox?"

An abashed smile crossed Nathan's face. "No, we've never carried anything more than a coinpurse."

“That’s fine. We have bags to transport coin back to headquarters. You can take one of those.”

He pointed to a cabinet on the far wall. Brohm opened it to find a small collection of leather sacks. He browsed and found one to his liking. Meanwhile, Iain lifted the carpet near his desk, revealing a hidden safe. He turned a wheel back and forth with practised finesse, then inserted a small handle that fit like a key and turned it. The lock disengaged with an audible thunk, and he pulled the door open. Brohm handed him the sack, and they waited while Iain counted the silver.

Task completed, Iain shut and locked the safe. Pulling the sack’s drawstring closed, he hefted it in both hands with a grunt. Brohm eased his burden, effortlessly whirling the sack over his shoulder.

“Safe travels, gentlemen,” Iain said. “Now, I’d like to get back to work.”

* * *

That evening, Nathan and Brohm set about packing their belongings for the long trip east. While organizing items into piles on the bed, Leah popped her head through the open doorway.

“Hey, boys,” she drawled, “I’m gonna miss you two.” She entered with her hands behind her back. “I’ve got something for you, Sid.”

Brohm drew close, a shy grin on his face. “Yuh?”

She presented a wide-brimmed straw hat. “Whitter wears his hood for protection from the sun, but I’ve noticed you don’t have anything. The days are getting hotter. This’ll help you keep cool.”

Brohm blinked in surprise, genuinely touched. “It’s hard to find hats that fit me right,” he said, trying it on.

“Looks like this one fits,” Leah said with a smile.

Brohm adjusted it slightly. “Thanks. But where’d you get it? This can’t be yours.”

She giggled. “Truth be told, I bought it for Edgard years ago, but it was too big for him. He kept it, though. I guess he felt bad or something.”

Brohm pulled it off, offering it back. “If it’s his, I can’t take it.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, plopping it back on his head. “I asked him, and he was more than happy to donate it.”

“Oh,” he said as he tested its fit again. He grinned and turned to Nathan. “How do I look?”

Watching from across the room, Nathan was unaware of the smile on his face. Brohm’s grin never failed to bring him comfort. Nathan filed this moment in his memory, locked with the few others he cherished. It was always the simplest moments that held the deepest emotional impact for him.

“It looks great!” It was no lie. The hat somehow multiplied Brohm’s

allure.

"Yuh?" He continued to fiddle with it. "Thanks, Leah."

"You're welcome." She hugged him, her arms barely reaching around his middle. "So, how long is this adventure going to take?"

"Given it's nearly a month to get there and back, it's gonna be a while," Nathan said.

She pouted, then accepted his answer with a nod. "Okay. Before I leave you two, I get to kiss the big lug goodbye."

She pecked Brohm on each cheek, causing them to blush, then crossed the room to Nathan and hugged him tightly.

"Take care of each other," she said softly in his ear.

"Don't worry about us. We'll be fine," he replied.

She winked and gently tapped his nose with a finger. "I know."

Once the guildhouse had quieted down for the night, Nathan placed the lit lantern on the window sill—their signal for Theodrik to meet them. Brohm lay in bed, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm gonna miss this place," he mused. "It's really starting to feel like a home."

Nathan lay down beside him. "We'll be back soon enough. Part of me is looking forward to being on the road again, though. Just you and me."

"And Cormac," Brohm muttered.

"Right. Cormac." Nathan sighed.

"What should we do with him after all this?"

Nathan turned toward Brohm. "We're not gonna kill him, right? I know that's probably going through your head."

Brohm gave him a sidelong glance and smirked. "You reckon?"

"I'm serious."

He rolled his eyes. "I know, I know."

Nathan reached out and laid a hand on his belly, rubbing it gently. "If we manage to get this daemon back to its home, Cormac should understand we're not trying to do anything bad."

"We need to make sure he never tells anyone," Brohm said.

"I think he knows that. We've made it clear."

Nathan snuggled closer, laying his head on Brohm's shoulder. Contented, he closed his eyes for only a moment before the big man nudged him.

"You hear that?" Brohm whispered.

Nathan raised his head to listen. As before, the chorus of insects had hushed, leaving an aberrant impression in the dark.

"What did you hear?" he asked.

"That leathery sound."

Nathan rose and stepped to the window. The moon had shifted in the sky, much farther than expected. He must've dozed off. Brohm joined him, and they surveyed the sky. He pointed above the treeline at a slow-moving shadow outlined by the stars. It wheeled in the sky before sinking into the

trees.

"Okay, let's go," Nathan said, closing the shutters of the lantern and taking it with them.

Upon reaching the front door, he signalled for Brohm to wait. Standing still, he listened for any movement within the building. He refused to make the same mistake twice. If anyone was going to follow them, they'd know. Satisfied after waiting a minute, he signalled Brohm to open the door. They advanced to the long grass behind the guildhouse and crouched on their haunches to observe their surroundings. The night song of the insects had returned, making it difficult to hear anyone approaching.

"Reckon it's safe," Brohm whispered.

"I know," Nathan said, "but I'd rather be cautious than caught by someone else too curious for their own good."

Brohm waited patiently until Nathan's concern was satisfied again, then led them through the grass toward the treeline of the ravine. Nathan opened the lantern's shutters—a small touch of light to help them not trip over roots. They descended cautiously, peering into the dark. Two red orbs, distant at the bottom of the ravine, announced Theodrik's presence.

Nathan couldn't help but shudder as a chill passed through his core. Lorne's dire warning returned to mind, filling him with doubt. Was it possible the daemon was using them for a sinister plot? Anything was possible, he told himself, but whenever they spoke to Theodrik, its words felt true.

"Nathan, Brohm. You come with news?" Theodrik asked as they approached, hunched down in an attempt to level their eyeline. "I did not expect word so quickly."

"We've got a possible lead," Nathan said. "Someone who lives in the city of Etton Crossing. She might know how to open a portal to get you back home."

Theodrik smiled, revealing its nightmarish teeth again. "This pleases me greatly. You fill me with hope. I thank you."

Nathan raised his hands. "I don't wanna give you false hope. This is only the beginning. We don't know if she'll help us."

It nodded. "In our short time of knowing each other, both of you have managed many great things. Do not underestimate yourselves."

Brohm scoffed. "What are you? A positive reinforcement daemon?"

"I am simply one who is appreciative of your efforts."

"But you're a daemon!" Brohm blurted out. "You should be trying to kill us, not say nice things."

Theodrik sat down to lower itself to Brohm's height, but no matter how hard it tried, the daemon always loomed over them. "I understand that our kind has been misconstrued. We are not all malicious souls. I will admit our initial meeting was unfavourable—"

"You tried to kill me!" Brohm spat.

"Yes, however, if you recall the event correctly, you did attack first."

“I was just protecting . . .” Brohm trailed off before continuing. “What would you expect me to do?”

Theodrik nodded. “It is clear you care deeply for your friend. You are his knight. Your actions spoke of bravery. Death could have befallen you, yet his safety was paramount, and you acted without hesitation.”

Those words extinguished the flame within Brohm. He glanced bashfully toward Nathan, and his voice cracked when he spoke. “Yuh.”

“Like anyone forced into slavery, I was incensed. Returning Nathan to Lord Helmsley was my singular goal. I was blinded by the need for freedom. You were the unfortunate soul in my way to reaching that goal. But afterward, upon reflection, I felt deep regret for my actions. Violence can come easy, but it is not my preference.” It bowed its head. “I humbly request your forgiveness, and ask that you accept my apologies for my transgressions.”

Brohm, speechless, let out a long sigh followed by a subtle nod.

“I can appreciate your situation,” Nathan said, “but I have one question. After you brought me to Helmsley—and then killed him—why didn’t you take me with you when I asked? You’d fulfilled the contract. You were free to do whatever you wanted.”

“This is true, however, I assumed the men under Lord Helmsley would continue to hunt us. In hindsight, we could have travelled far from these lands to escape them. But then, you would have never been reunited with your knight.”

Nathan glanced at Brohm, who was staring at the ground with another bashful smile on his face.

Theodrik continued. “In my many years, I have observed that events occur for a reason. Some call it fate.”

Nathan shook his head. “I don’t believe in fate. I can’t. The idea of our lives being out of our control? What’s the point of life if it’s already been planned?”

“Your life is a gift. It is a pleasure worth experiencing, even if the story has already been written for you. The good and the bad. I am not saying your every decision has been preordained, but the major branches of your life cannot be fought. That is the strength of fate. Its power is without equal.”

Nathan’s life flashed before his mind’s eye. He considered the decisions and choices he’d made. The outcomes they brought. Were they really part of some grand design?

Brohm cleared his throat. “So, uhm, maybe we should get back to the plan?”

Nathan broke himself free from his thoughts and Theodrik’s words—he refused to believe them. “Right. We’ll be heading east by horseback in the morning. I guess you should follow us in case this person agrees to help.”

“Yes, this is a logical plan,” Theodrik said. “You travel by day. I will follow at night.”

“What about once we reach Etton Crossing? How do we keep you

updated? You can't risk being seen in the city, and having a lantern out a window isn't going to work."

Brohm touched a finger to his lip as he thought. "You said you could sense where Nathan is."

"Indeed," Theodrik replied.

"Reckon you could find him in a field or forest outside the city? If we head out at night, that could be your signal."

Theodrik presented his toothy smile, causing Brohm to involuntarily flinch. "This is an excellent suggestion. Yes, I could sense Nathan leaving the city at night and treat that as your signal."

Nathan patted Brohm's shoulder. "Good idea, big guy."

Brohm chuckled in response, rubbing the back of his head.

The daemon rose to its feet. "Very well. I am delighted by this news. I wish you safe journey, and will patiently wait in hiding near this city you speak of."

"Okay, well, I guess we'll see you there," Nathan said, raising a hand goodbye.

"Fare well, Nathan and his knight, Brohm," Theodrik said.

They stumbled back as its wings unfolded, pumping hard to lift its bulky body into the air. Dirt and dust billowed up, forcing them to shield their eyes. Once it had departed, Brohm looked over to Nathan.

"It knows I'm not really a knight, yuh?"

Chapter Six

A foredawn sky of deep blue and purple hues welcomed Nathan, Brohm, and Cormac as they stepped onto the guildhouse veranda. The morning air, crisp and cool, functioned as a slap in the face to shed any grogginess that remained. Brohm, carrying a lantern in one hand and a multitude of bags in the other, headed toward the stables. Nathan and Cormac followed in his wake, similarly burdened with their own gear. Their steeds were groomed and tacked. Saddlebags were filled with goods and equipment. Rucksacks were donned.

By the time they were ready to mount up, the eastern horizon smouldered orange and red. Riding across the courtyard, Nathan glanced at the guildhouse one last time. It stood stately in the early morning light—a far cry from when they first laid eyes on it. He felt a pang of pride at what he and Brohm had accomplished. This house, and the people who worked in it, were helping others. A year earlier, he would've never imagined they'd be helping people rather than hurting them. Together, they'd somehow become laudable men. He turned his attention to Brohm, who was adjusting his reins. Seemingly able to feel his gaze, Brohm glanced back at him.

"All good?" he asked, offering his crooked smile.

"Yeah," Nathan replied. "Cormac, you ready to lead?"

"I certainly am. This way, boys."

He broke into a canter, and they followed suit. The cool wind on Nathan's face was refreshing. He always enjoyed the beginning of a long journey—equal parts freedom and uncertainty. Travelling was often tedious, especially if the landscape was monotonous, but he always tried to appreciate the beauty of his surroundings. As they reached the edge of Millsfield, they slowed to accommodate the townsfolk starting their day.

A woman's scream emerged from the north, echoing off the ramshackle buildings. Cormac pulled on his reins and turned his horse to get a view of the commotion, but nothing could be seen from their position. Yelling men—words of caution, judging by their tone—joined the woman, but their distance made it impossible to decipher any words. The folk on the street all stopped in their tracks, turning toward the disturbance, unsure what to do.

"Should we investigate?" Cormac asked.

As though in reply, the woman screamed again, her fear palpable. The men's voices—rising in panic—matched her intensity. Nathan made the decision and turned his horse down the side street toward the growing pandemonium. Brohm and Cormac took up the rear. Hooves dug deep into the dirt road as Nathan forced his mount around two tight corners. Frightened onlookers jumped out of the way to avoid being trampled. The voices grew

clearer at each turn until Nathan reached their source.

The woman stood trapped on a dead-end street, her back against the wall of a dilapidated wooden building. To Nathan's confusion, two men threw rocks and taunted her. He advanced warily on his horse, with Brohm and Cormac following near.

"Hey!" Brohm shouted. "What're you doing? Leave her alone!"

The two men glanced at Brohm. Faces fear-stricken, they stepped back and pointed at four iratxos that were nearly upon the woman.

"Gods damn it!" Nathan said under his breath.

He dismounted, pulled his quiver and bow free, and nocked an arrow. He took a deep breath, aimed, and released. The arrow whistled to its target and lodged deep into the head of one creature, knocking it down from the impact. Its fellows jumped in surprise and turned their attention away from the woman. Brohm, approaching Nathan's side, yanked his sword free from its scabbard.

Nathan retrieved another arrow. "Don't approach them. Not unless you have to."

The big man grunted in agreement.

Realizing the threat, the three iratxos scurried toward Nathan, forcing him to fire an arrow prematurely. Instead of the head, the arrow hit its chest, but the creature still went down. Another arrow nocked, but with no time to aim, it flew wide. Brohm took this as his cue and ran headlong at the remaining two iratxos before they could reach Nathan. He let out a bellow, his sword held low and ready to one side. The iratxos responded in kind with teeth, claws, and guttural laughter.

Brohm swung as soon as he was in range. The blade sank deep, nearly bisecting the creature. That momentum caused it to fly into the air, spilling gore onto the dirt. He had tried to hit both with one wild swing, but the second dodged the attack and moved to claim its advantage. Nathan had another arrow nocked and aimed during the melee, freeing it before the last iratxo could touch Brohm. It hit true, embedding into its head with a hollow thunk.

There was a moment of silence while the onlookers held their breath. Nathan used it to make sure nothing else was coming. Brohm stood defensively, his sword at the ready, glancing both ways, looking for another fight. Nervous murmurs arose in the growing crowd, but with each breath Nathan took, they fell more at ease.

"That could've been a lot worse," Nathan said to Brohm.

The big man lowered his blade and stepped toward him. "Look behind you," he said with a smirk.

Cormac, holding the reins of their horses, stared at them with a mix of fear and amazement on his face. It was clear he wanted to say something, but nothing intelligible emerged from his open mouth.

A slow clap came from the gathering crowd, acting as a catalyst for others to join in. The throng closed in to bestow their thanks, but Nathan wormed

past them toward the men and woman who'd been terrorized by the iratxos.

"Did any of you get bit?" he asked.

All three shook their heads, and then the woman drew near.

"Thank you," she managed to stammer, fighting against the rush of fear-fuelled adrenaline. She rubbed her hands, eyes dancing left and right, searching for trouble.

"You'll be alright," Nathan said. "Just take some deep breaths."

She nodded and followed his advice. "What were those things?"

"They have a few names, but most call them goblings." Nathan tilted his head toward Brohm. "We run the local Adventurer's Guild branch. We've fought those things before."

"Where did they come from?" one of the men asked.

Nathan was about to speak the truth before biting his tongue. "Nobody's sure. We're actually heading east in search of answers."

Brohm approached from behind. "Good timing on our part, I reckon."

"No kidding," responded the man, chuckling nervously. "Our rock-throwing wasn't any help. Thanks, both of you."

"Yuh, no problem," Brohm replied.

They returned to Cormac and the horses. The old man had gathered his wits and wore an apprehensive smile.

"I've never seen such a display," he said. "You handled yourself admirably."

Brohm uttered a dry grunt. "It wasn't anything special."

"I beg to disagree," Cormac said, gesturing to the crowd. "I wasn't alone in my amazement."

"If you say so," Brohm said with a shrug. "Let's get moving."

They mounted up and found their way back to Millsfield's main street. Cormac took the lead again at a trot, giving Nathan time to consider the attack. He pondered how long the daemon had been in the area. It had only been a few days since their first encounter. Had it been stalking him longer than that, flying around the guildhouse each night for weeks? Perhaps months? Zoe mentioned there had been more attacks at night, but didn't say for how long.

Regardless, he was glad they were moving away from Millsfield, bringing the daemon with them. Hopefully, it would provide the townsfolk some respite from additional attacks. Of course, more iratxos could be hiding, waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting victim. He nudged his mount to position himself alongside Brohm.

"We should go back and warn the guildhouse about the attack. There could be more coming."

Brohm shook his head. "If there is, people can get help from the town guard or they can go to the guildhouse. They can take care of themselves."

Nathan raised his eyebrows. "We just witnessed that they *can't* take care of themselves."

Brohm laughed. “Yuh, good point. But we’re not their dads. Reckon word’ll spread real quick about the show they just saw.”

“I suppose.”

“Don’t worry about ’em, l’il buddy. Besides, we’re trying to end this mess for good. No time to waste.”

Convinced by Brohm’s words, Nathan nodded.

They were soon clear of town, allowing them to safely ride at an accelerated pace. He’d ridden this road many times, but he enjoyed it all the same. Being so close to Helmsley Keep, it was well maintained. Wide, flat farmlands allowed for uninterrupted views of the northeast mountain range, and he never tired of those vistas.

* * *

By midmorning, they stopped to eat a simple breakfast of meat and cheese stuffed into soft buns Edgard had baked the night before. Brohm let out soft grunts of enjoyment with each bite.

“I’m gonna miss Edgard’s cooking,” he said with his mouth full.

“I’m sure we’ll be able to find decent food once we reach Etton Crossing,” Nathan said.

“You can count on it,” Cormac said.

Brohm perked up. “Yuh?”

“Indeed. The city is known for its cuisine. It has an unofficial food district where chefs from all over the region vie to hone their craft.”

“Sounds expensive,” Brohm mused.

“I have no doubt. I’ve never visited this district, but word spreads.”

Nathan nudged Brohm with an elbow. “I’m sure we can afford to indulge in a tasty meal or three.”

At first, Brohm frowned in confusion, but then remembered the ridiculous amount of coin they were carrying with them. He gave Nathan a sly grin in response. While preparing to continue their journey, Nathan winced at the warming sun and pulled up his hood.

“Where’s your hat?” he asked Brohm. “Did you forget it?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, untying it from a saddlebag. He donned it, adjusting the brim to his liking. “It look okay?”

Nathan smiled and nodded, still finding it surprisingly charming.

The day wore on uneventfully, and by late afternoon, they reached the traveller’s inn near the road toward Helmsley Keep. Every time they entered, Nathan hoped the owner would improve the lodgings—even fixing the uneven tables would go a long way—but, yet again, found himself let down.

“Why don’t we camp outdoors?” he muttered to Brohm. “The weather’s nice.”

The big man shook his head. “I’ll always choose a bed over hard ground.”

“Even if the bed is just as lumpy?”

Interpreting Brohm’s expression, Nathan knew he’d lose the argument if he continued. With a sigh, he allowed the big man to wrap an arm around his shoulder and usher him into the dingy parlour.

To reach the next day’s destination, Remich, meant leaving early in the morning and arriving well after sunset. While the day’s ride was long, the road’s flat and well-kept condition prevailed, and aside from passing a convoy of goods, remained tranquil.

They managed to reach the walled town before the massive wooden doors had closed for the night. Nathan actively reminded himself not to head to the Black Lamb Inn this time. He still missed Griff, but at least he’d managed to say goodbye, however briefly. Despite his wish to offer a proper farewell, it was foolish to risk going back again.

“You wanna stay at a posh inn tonight?” he asked. “It’d even out yesterday’s terrible sleep.”

“Sounds good to me,” Brohm said.

“While I’m uneasy to indulge in such luxury, I’ll not let that stop you,” Cormac said. “Lead the way, Whitter.”

Nathan directed them to a small, gated quarter he’d heard about, but never explored—a refuge from the unwashed riffraff. He considered it odd anyone of stature would decide to live in Remich, considering its reputation for attracting undesirables.

Passing through the open gates, the town transformed immediately. The streets were clean. Shops and houses were in excellent repair. No broken glass in the window panes, and many were gilded with ornate ironwork. Garden beds of blooming flowers bordered the houses, filling the air with exotic scents. Even the hubbub of the town had quietened. Aside from one passerby, the streets were deserted, and their horses clopped reverberantly on the cobblestone.

“Reckon there’s an inn around here?” Brohm asked.

As they reached an intersection, Nathan pointed to the right. A three-storey building, well-lit and well-kept, answered Brohm’s question. A few men, impeccably dressed, stood near the entrance. They chatted in hushed voices, glancing toward their group as they approached.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Nathan said. “Could you point us to where we can stable our horses, please?”

One of the men scoffed. “Do we look like stableboys?”

“Perhaps these *are* the stableboys,” the other quipped.

They chortled at their supposed humour.

Nathan snuck a sidelong glance at Brohm. The big man’s expression told him what he already knew. A year earlier, Brohm would’ve jumped down, lumbered over, and punched the man in the face. Now, he only rubbed a fist in his hand.

"Jokes aside, we'd appreciate if you could tell us," Nathan said.

The second man used his nose to point. "Can't you read? Around back."

Nathan turned to the direction indicated and noticed a well-lit sign with an arrow pointing to the side of the building: *STABLES*. He offered a curt nod in thanks, and then led Brohm and Cormac down a wide alley.

"Assholes," Brohm muttered.

"Yes, in this case, I would agree with you," Cormac said.

The stablemaster emerged from a small hut as they drew near. Despite his station, even he was dressed smartly.

"Hi. Are there rules on attire for this place?" Nathan asked.

The stablemaster looked them up and down. "No, but rest assured, you'll get some dirty looks."

"I'm used to that," Brohm said, and the stablemaster offered a knowing smile.

Nathan was pleased to find a rear entrance into the inn, meaning they wouldn't need to cross those smug men again. He felt genuine concern Brohm wouldn't be able to hold back his retribution a second time. They entered a dimly lit foyer, overcome by the smell of delicious food. A dapper headwaiter approached with apprehension.

"May I . . . help you, gentlemen?" he asked.

Hungry and tired, Nathan didn't want trouble. They had the coin, and there was no reason they couldn't stay here. Persuading this man to agree was another matter.

"Good evening. My colleagues and I would like dinner and two rooms for the night." Before the headwaiter could reply, he cut him off. "I appreciate our appearance is not to your standards, but we've been on the road for a few days now, and would greatly enjoy the comfort of your establishment." Nathan hefted his heavy coinpurse. It jingled reassuringly. "We can pay in advance if that helps you overlook our situation."

The headwaiter pursed his lips, glancing from the leather pouch, to Nathan, to Brohm, to Cormac, and then back to the pouch. "Very well, however, I would ask you to dine in your rooms."

Nathan nodded. "A fine compromise."

After agreeing on their fee, they were stealthily ushered upstairs. The room was spacious and overly decorated, but a welcome sight compared to yesterday's accommodations. A four poster bed, canopied with extravagant white lace fabric, commanded the room. To one side sat an intricately engraved table and four chairs.

Cormac was shown his own room across the hall, but Nathan asked him to join them for dinner. Brohm's eyes burned into Nathan, but he ignored it. If they were to travel together, Brohm had to accept Cormac as part of their group.

A trio of servers appeared, setting the table with practised efficiency. Candles were lit, and a substantial carafe of wine was proffered, to which

Brohm eyed with longing.

"Please be seated," the lead server said.

Nathan and Cormac sat on one side, and Brohm moved one chair out of the way to sit opposite them. Three trays covered by silver domes were placed on the table. In unison, the covers were lifted, allowing steam to waft up, bringing with it delicious aromas. Brohm's eyes grew wide, surprised by the generous portions of meat and vegetables.

The servers bowed slightly, and the lead server spoke, "Enjoy your meal."

"Thanks," Brohm said with a grin.

Matching their swift arrival, the servers exited and silently closed the door.

"Reckon you get what you pay for, yuh?" Brohm said, immediately tucking into his meal.

"Well, in this case, I'm not so sure," Nathan said. "What we paid for the rooms and food was probably double."

Brohm, his mouth full, grunted his disapproval.

"Thank you again, both of you, for including me on this journey," Cormac said. "And of course, for paying my room and board."

Nathan casually waved a hand. "It's nothing. Thanks for being our guide."

"I feel as though I'm cheating you. The road east eventually leads to the city. Any map could've shown that."

"Maybe so, but we didn't have a map."

Brohm interrupted. "Let's get one thing straight. You're here because I don't trust you outta my sight."

Cormac stared at his plate of food, chewing hesitantly. He could only nod in response.

"Being our guide is a bonus, I reckon," Brohm said. "At least you're good for something."

"Broh—" Nathan cut himself short before speaking again. "*Sid*, come on. Cut the guy some slack."

Cormac glanced over to Nathan. "No, he's right. 'Twas my inquisitiveness that has thrown us into this situation, and I apologize for that. Sid, I'll do everything in my power to show I'm a trustworthy man."

Brohm glared at him from the corner of his eye. "Don't reckon that's possible."

Nathan slammed a fist on the table. Glasses and cutlery rang in response. All eyes fell to him.

He spoke with an even cadence. "We'll be travelling together for a while. Cormac is doing everything he can to keep things civil. Sid, you—"

He flinched as Brohm pushed his plate away and abruptly stood up, toppling his chair.

"Oh! This is my fault?" the big man cried.

Nathan hid his face with his hands.

“This fucker gets in our business, and it’s *my* fault? This guy who saw us and somehow knew we’ve done bad things.”

“But ’tis the truth, is it not?” Cormac interjected.

Nathan winced. “I think it’s best you say nothing right now.”

Brohm’s wild eyes burned into Cormac while pointing at Nathan. “You better listen to him, old man, otherwise I’ll show you what a *bad guy* I really am.”

Cormac raised his hands as a sign of peace. “I’m sorry, Sid. I understand my words hurt you. ’Twas not my intent, and I aim to learn from my errors.” He nudged Brohm’s plate back into place. “Please, sit down and finish your meal. I don’t want it to go to waste on my account.”

Brohm’s chest heaved as he took deep breaths through his nose, considering the monk’s request. Nathan watched him, recalling their conversation about jealousy. His mistake now was siding with Cormac, but how else could he explain Brohm was the source of tension within the group? Perhaps Brohm already knew this but refused to accept it. Perhaps he aimed to cause a rift on purpose.

Nathan beckoned with an open hand. “Please?”

With a sigh, Brohm scuffed his feet back to the table, uprighted the chair, and roughly sat down. It was a wonder the chair didn’t buckle under the sudden weight. Nathan reached across the table and covered Brohm’s hand with his. Brohm glanced up—almost bashfully—then squeezed Nathan’s hand in return.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Don’t be,” Nathan replied. “I told you. One of the reasons I love you is that fiery nature of yours.”

Cormac nibbled on a chunk of roast, ostensibly appreciating their calm exchange. They joined him, completing their meal in silence.

“Well,” Brohm drawled. “It might’ve been expensive, but that was good.”

“We can afford it,” Nathan said. “The way things are going at the guildhouse, I don’t think we’ll ever have to worry about coin again.”

“Yuh, how weird is that?”

Cormac dabbed his mouth with a napkin and rose from his seat. “Well, boys, the hour grows late, and we have many long days ahead of us. My thanks again for the meal. I’ll leave you two.” He headed to the door but hesitated while reaching for the latch. Instead, he turned toward them. “Sid. Again, my apologies. I understand it might be impossible to earn your truth, so I’ll not push the matter.”

Brohm, his back to the monk, nodded sternly.

“Good night,” Cormac added in haste as he exited the room.

Once they were alone, Brohm rolled his eyes.

“What?” Nathan asked.

“I’m a fool.”

“Why do you say that?”

Brohm grabbed the carafe of wine and emptied it into his cup. "'Cause I let that old man get under my skin, again." He downed his drink in one gulp and slammed the cup on the table. A lewd grin spread across his face. "But reckon I have a way to say sorry to you."

"Oh yeah? What'd you have in mind?" Nathan asked.

Brohm rose and pushed the chair back deliberately, wood against wood resonating within the room. Unhurried, he stepped toward Nathan, then using his foot against the chair leg, rotated his seat. Taking Nathan's arms, Brohm lifted him over a shoulder and carried him to bed. Nathan, chuckling, never revealed he loved it when Brohm did this, but perhaps he already knew. With a sweeping motion, Brohm laid him gently onto the downy mattress. Thick fingers fumbled at Nathan's trousers, managing to free his manhood.

"Hold on," Nathan said. "I thought you didn't enjoy giving head."

Brohm smirked. "Consider it my way of saying sorry."

Nathan's head fell back onto a pillow, uttering a moan as Brohm took him into his mouth.

* * *

Grey skies greeted them early the next morning. Nathan had been dreading this day, knowing they'd arrive at Summerton by nightfall. His old accomplice and friend, Samuel, used to own the Willow Inn in the village. It was also a front for their covert business: assassin for hire. Samuel arranged the jobs, and Nathan executed them, literally. Upon discovering this, Lord Helmsley had the place torched with everyone inside, including Samuel.

Nathan's glum mood—or possibly the weather, he couldn't be sure—crept onto Brohm and Cormac. Neither appeared particularly enthusiastic while preparing for the day's journey. With a minimum of interaction, they were soon outside the gates of Remich.

Brohm was first to break the silence after a few hours on the road. He manoeuvred his mount alongside Nathan.

"Summerton's coming up."

Nathan gave him a sidelong glance. "I'm aware," he said in a flat tone.

"I'm just wondering . . . uh, you reckon there'll be somewhere to bunk tonight?"

Nathan shrugged with a sigh. "No idea. We can camp if need be."

Brohm eyed the featureless grey sky. "Hopefully no rain tonight."

Nathan grunted in response, wanting to end the conversation, but the big man's gaze held on—wanting to say something else but unable to find the words. After a few moments, Brohm gave up and fell back to the rear position.

After leaving Remich, the northern mountains receded, and their

surroundings—grassy flatlands punctuated by scrubby bushes—grew tiresome. Nathan's mind wandered—thinking of the past, thinking of Samuel. His friend had warned him something didn't feel right when giving the final assignment. Nathan's response had been a cocksure reply. The job turned out to be a trap laid by Lord Helmsley. He would never forgive himself for that mistake, and hoped to never ignore a friend's intuition again. Yet Brohm warned him to steer clear of Tarn, and Nathan had ignored that as well. Would he ever learn from his mistakes?

Around noontide, or what felt like it, Cormac signalled to stop. "How about a break? A bite to eat?"

Nathan wasn't hungry, but knew an empty stomach would do him no good. With a nod, he dismounted, and they followed suit. While Cormac ran to a nearby bush to relieve himself, Nathan felt a warm hand on his shoulder. He turned to Brohm, whose eyes pierced through him.

"You okay, l'il buddy?" Brohm asked, wearing a grim smile. "Reckon this ain't easy for you."

Nathan wrapped his arms around him. "I'll live."

Brohm held him close, kissing him on the cheek. That tiny gesture worked wonders to etch away the gloom. Nathan might've lost Samuel, but at least he had Brohm.

"Once we're past Summerton, you try to forget it, yuh?" Brohm said.

Nathan stretched up and gave Brohm a kiss on the neck in return. "I will. Thanks, big guy."

After a hasty lunch, they continued on the road east. By early afternoon, the low clouds had gradually dispersed. Patches of sunlight streaked out, scanning across the grassy plains, bringing some colour to the otherwise bland countryside.

They approached a crossroads, familiar to both Nathan and Brohm. To the north was the road to Dead Man's Pass. To the south, an abandoned farm owned by Brohm's now-dead father. Nearby stood a copse with a creek running through it—a place they hid for the night while on the run. A small part of him wanted to veer off the road and head for those trees. They'd only known each other for a few days, and he sought to relive the experience of getting to know Brohm again. Cormac, of course, was oblivious to all this. He rode east without looking back.

The hours passed, and familiar landmarks emerged from the landscape. Farmhouses and their surrounding crops announced their near arrival to Summerton. Nathan's gut tightened, knowing the village would appear over the next few rises. He took a deep breath. There was nothing gained by feeling anxious, but telling his mind that was a losing battle.

The late afternoon sun at their backs drew long shadows on the dusty road. Cresting the last hill, the plain and honest buildings that made up the village came into view. The Willow Inn, normally looming large over the rest of the settlement, was missing. He expected it, but that did nothing to ease the

grief he felt.

Cormac slowed their pace to a trot and addressed a passerby. “Hail. Are there lodgings in your fair village?”

The man smiled, pointing farther down the road. “Sure is. The Willow Inn welcomes all travellers.”

Nathan fought the sudden vertigo assailing him, nearly falling from his horse. He had so many questions, but his tongue refused to work. Cormac, unaware of the importance of such a statement, offered his thanks and urged his mount onward. Nathan trailed behind, giving Brohm a baffled look. The big man could only shrug in confusion.

Reaching a small bend in the road, a new building stood in place of the original inn. It was smaller—only one storey—which explained why they didn’t catch sight of it earlier, but its design was quaint and welcoming. Small wooden flowerbeds hung from the windowsills. The burnt husk of the giant willow tree was gone, and in its place, a willow sapling. Nathan’s throat tightened as he tried to stifle his emotions. The stables stood separately behind the inn, however no one was there to receive them.

“I’ll take care of the horses,” Nathan said, his voice breaking. “You two go on inside.”

Cormac dismounted. “There’s no need for that. ’Tis a quicker task if we all do our part.”

Nathan took the reins from the monk. “No, I insist. You look tired.”

Cormac rubbed his chin. “Do I? I don’t feel particularly tired—”

“Let’s go, old man,” Brohm interjected while shouldering their rucksacks. He wrapped a free arm around Cormac and led them inside.

Taking another deep breath, Nathan silently thanked Brohm. He fell to the task of removing the horses tack, brushing them down, and checking for wounds. Waiting for them to settle, he stepped out to admire the inn again. The sun was near setting, and warm lamp light glowed from the windows. The grounds were carefully manicured with river pebbles lining the foundation.

The village grew muted as dusk loomed. Crickets began their nightly song. Faint, polite laughter emanated from the inn. Nathan felt content just to lean against the wall and enjoy the peace, but a few moments later, Brohm’s familiar form emerged from around the front. He lumbered toward Nathan, following his gaze at the inn.

“You okay?”

Nathan nodded, a small smile on his face. “I can’t believe this is here. Who built this?”

Brohm shook his head, unable to provide an answer. “We got two rooms. There’s a tankard waiting for you. Food smells good, too. But reckoned we’d wait until you were ready before ordering.”

Nathan headed back into the stables, motioning for him to follow. “I’ll feed and water the horses. Could you take in the saddlebags?”

Brohm grunted in affirmation, did as was asked, and left Nathan to his chores. “Don’t take long, yuh?”

After caring for the horses, Nathan entered the front door and was met with a whiff of fresh wood. It was to be expected considering the young age of the building. Brohm needlessly waved from their table—there were only two other groups of patrons—but Nathan waved back with a smile anyway. As promised, a tankard waited for him. He took a slow, deep draught of the brew, savouring it.

A young woman approached. “You men looking for some supper? We have roast chicken with all the fixings.”

Brohm nodded, licking his lips. “Yes, please. We’re all hungry.”

She gave him a wink. “Comin’ up.”

As the hours passed, the place began to fill up. Brohm was unexpectedly cordial toward Cormac, but Nathan refused to say anything in fear the spell would break. Their server returned regularly to check in on them, making sure their tankards were full. By the time of her next return, Nathan had worked up the courage to speak up.

“Excuse me. I was wondering if I could speak to the owner?”

She wiped her hand on a towel over her shoulder and offered to shake his hand.

“Name’s Katlyn.”

He was taken aback, presuming she was far too young to own a tavern, but realized she’d just proven him wrong. With an embarrassed chuckle, he shook her hand.

“I’m Whitter. My companions, Sid and Cormac.”

She gave them a nod in greeting. “I hope you’re all enjoying yourself tonight.”

Brohm raised his tankard. “Yuh!”

Cormac nodded back courteously. “Indeed. ’Tis a fine establishment.”

“Thankya, thankya,” she said, performing a mock curtsy.

“I was wondering if I could ask you some questions. Privately?”

She offered a quizzical look. “Nothing serious, I hope?”

“Nothing of the sort. I just . . .”

“Sure, but let’s keep it quick.” She led him to a quiet corner and gestured for his questions.

“What you’ve built here, it means a lot to me,” he said, absentmindedly scratching his arm.

She eyed him inquisitively. “Does it now? How so?”

“Did you”—his voice cracked and he cleared his throat—“did you know Samuel?”

Katlyn stood blindsided by the question, using a smile to mask her sorrow. “He was my uncle. You knew him?”

Nathan nodded. “He was a close friend. He’d be proud of what you accomplished here.”

She swallowed hard, her eyes glinting in the light. “It seemed the right thing to do, y’know? He had money squirrelled away, and that inheritance came to me. I thought: why not use that to rebuild and run the place?”

He smiled. “Even from the outside, it’s obvious you took great care reestablishing what Samuel had built. It’s beautiful.”

A patron called out to Katlyn, interrupting their moment, and she shrugged nervously, wiping her eyes.

“Are you really running this place on your own?” Nathan asked.

“I’ve got a cook, but yeah, it’s just me out front,” she said. “You want a job?”

They shared a laugh. She rushed to the customer, but then pivoted back to Nathan, mouthing a ‘thank you’.

“What was that about?” Brohm asked as Nathan returned to their table.

Nathan jerked a thumb at Katlyn. “Turns out she’s Samuel’s niece.”

“Who’s Samuel?” Cormac asked.

Nathan distractedly waved a hand, thinking of the past. “Just a friend.”

* * *

The continuing days fell to routine. Dry, dusty trails led them faithfully eastward, bounding through small towns and villages. Their way remained on regularly patrolled arterial routes, so highwaymen were rare occurrences. While they were of little concern to Nathan and Brohm, not having to deal with bandits was a boon.

Cormac continued to sheepishly voice his concern he wasn’t required to be their guide. In response, Brohm reminded him that his given task was secondary. His trust toward the old monk seemed to be growing, however, much to Nathan’s relief. Travelling days on end with someone tends to reveal their true character, and Cormac’s thoughtful nature was on display for all to witness.

Brohm’s temper had simmered down as well. Perhaps it was because there was nothing to be enraged about in the middle of nowhere, but Nathan didn’t care. He had no doubt Brohm would find something to be angry about once they arrived at Etton Crossing, but for now, if Brohm was happy, so was Nathan.

Nine days into their journey, they reached a drastic change in their surroundings. Instead of tedious grasslands and forests, the eastern road wormed its way over foothills. Beyond, vast mountains loomed.

Cormac slowed to a stop, turning his mount to speak to them. “’Tis where the road gets more treacherous. Last time I travelled it, there were two landslides. I was told they’re cleared regularly, but ’tis a lot of road to maintain.” He gestured in an arc. “Beyond that mountain range is Etton

Crossing."

"Are we travelling *over* those mountains?" Nathan asked, the memory of Dead Man's Pass still strong in his mind.

Cormac shook his head. "'Tis a trade route. Nothing that dangerous."

"What about food?" Brohm asked. "Should've we stocked up at the last town?"

Again, Cormac shook his head. "There are traveller inns at regular intervals."

"Ugh, my favourite," Brohm said, rolling his eyes.

"You'll be fine," Nathan said in a teasing tone. "Let's get moving."

They soon reached the first lodging at the foot of the mountain range. Despite there being three hours of light left, they decided to stop for the day for safety's sake. The ramshackle building, nestled within evergreens, appeared deserted as they approached.

"You sure this is still a trade route?" Nathan asked Cormac.

The monk looked back, distraught. "'Twas many years since I travelled it, but I just assumed . . ."

Brohm pointed at gentle smoke, nearly invisible, rising from the chimney. "Well, somebody's home."

He took the initiative and walked up to the nearest window, peering in. A moment later, he waved at someone within. The front door opened, and a man popped his head out.

"Ye're an early bunch," he said. "Stoppin' to eat or stayin' the night?"

"Both," Brohm replied.

"Well, get yer horses stabled and c'mon in."

The inn's accommodations were best described as limited. There was a common area for eating, and another room lined with cots. Whoever built the place had little concern for privacy.

"Cormac, I thought you said this was a traveller's inn, not a barracks," Brohm muttered.

The monk shrugged. "'Tis better than being out in the cold, is it not?"

The proprietor arrived at their table with three tankards of ale. "As I said, ye're early. Supper's still cookin'. Name's Tully."

"What's on the menu?" Brohm asked.

"Same as always: beef stew."

Brohm let out a small groan. "Reckon I shouldn't be surprised."

Tully laughed, crossing his arms. "I'm guessin' ye haven't travelled this road before?"

"You guessed right," Nathan said, scratching his arm.

"In that case, I'am bearer of bad news. Travellin' the pass will be a repeat, day after day. I don't own th' place, Etton Crossing gov'ment does. I just keep 'er running. We get traders mostly, but o' course we sometimes get travellers such as yerself."

"So you gotta eat beef stew forever?" Brohm asked incredulously.

Tully's eyes sparkled as he laughed again. "Nah, nah. We take shifts, jus' a week on, week off. The missus would miss me somethin' awful if I was here for good, not t'mention me own sanity, eh?"

He pantomimed hanging himself with a tongue sticking out for emphasis. Brohm let out a chuckle, but it came out awkward. Tully either didn't notice or didn't care.

"Anyway, I'll keep yer tankards filled. Just gimme a holler," he said as he returned to the kitchen.

They thanked him, then—eager to wash the dust from their throats—sipped at their drink. It was warm.

Brohm grimaced. "Reckon I'd go nuts living here before week's end."

Nathan snorted a laugh while Cormac presented Brohm with a chiding look.

"Now, now. 'Tis no reason to be harsh. The man provides a valuable service. Yes, I would imagine this job can be hard, yet he seems to be able to weather it well enough."

"All the more power to him," Nathan replied. "I'm with Sid. I'd go crazy if all I could eat was beef stew and warm ale."

Regardless, they all sipped their drinks again. It wasn't nearly as bad this time. Brohm leaned back in his chair slightly, offering Nathan a sly grin before speaking.

"So, Cormac . . . you killed someone, yuh?"

The monk choked on his ale. Nathan didn't appreciate Brohm's bluntness, but kept his mouth shut. Instead, he shot a glance back, expressing his displeasure. Cormac coughed again, yet managed to compose himself swiftly enough.

"I suppose I do owe you a proper explanation—"

"No, you don't," Nathan interjected. "It's your own business, your own life."

Cormac held up a finger. "You've shared your secrets with me. 'Tis only fair I share mine."

Brohm leaned in, and Nathan followed suit, allowing Cormac to speak softly. Even though they were alone in the large common area, and Tully busy in the kitchen, it was better to keep things isolated from prying ears.

"I had been a loyal monk for many decades. The order, 'twas my life. I still follow the tenets despite my banishment. The most important—what I try to uphold every day—is to help those in need. 'Tis such a simple task, is it not?"

Nathan and Brohm shrugged their shoulders in response.

"After what happened, I was—"

"Whoa, hold up," Brohm said. "You skipped over the 'what'. *What* happened?"

Cormac held his hands together and bit his lip. "On a day like any other, I was tasked with sweeping the upper level of our keep. 'Tis an ancient place.

All stone. Quite dark inside, even during the day. I was lost in thought and didn't hear Nasim—a friend and fellow monk—sneaking up on me."

"Why was he sneaking?" Brohm asked.

Cormac stared past the walls of the tavern, observing his memories. "We amused each other with antics, harmless pranks. He snuck up on me, grabbed my shoulder, and shouted in an attempt to startle me." He let out a sigh. "Yes, he scared me. I reacted by flinching. The butt of the broom hit him in the face. Not hard, but enough to cause him to stumble back, right down the long and narrow steps. I had turned just in time to see his face before shadow took it."

He took an unhurried draught of ale before continuing.

"That face will forever haunt me. I didn't see what happened, but I could hear it. He tumbled down those rock steps at such terrible speed. His head cracked open at the bottom."

Nathan couldn't help but grimace.

"'Twas an accident. Such a stupid thing. Had I been standing away from the stairwell, or even just paying closer attention to my surroundings, I would've heard Nasim's approach. His fate would've been a bruise or two, not his death."

"You got kicked out for that?" Brohm asked. "But you must've explained it was an accident."

Cormac nodded. "I did, but after a trial by my peers, 'twas decided I should be banished. That was my fate, but 'twas a small price to pay for . . ." He broke down in tears.

To Nathan's surprise, Brohm reached out and laid a hand on the monk's shoulder.

"Listen, I'm sorry for being an ass," Brohm said. "I say things without thinking."

Cormac sniffled and wiped his eyes. "'Tis your nature, Sid. Don't apologize for being yourself."

"But I brought up a sore spot. I was just foolin'. I'm . . . I'm sorry."

Cormac nodded, accepting his apology. "My story, 'twas bound to be told sooner or later. Now you know."

Silence fell between the three. In the kitchen, Tully poorly hummed a tune. Dishes clanked. In unison, the three drank from their tankards. Nathan wanted to know more but didn't dare ask. Perhaps another day.

* * *

Tully was true to his word. Each day, they arrived at another traveller's inn resembling the last—strategically placed within one day's travel in poor weather. That meant on a clear day, they arrived with hours to spare. It was wasted time, but Brohm and Cormac agreed it was better to lose a day or two

over the course of the journey than be caught in the rain in the middle of the night.

Considering the indistinguishable build and design of the inns, Brohm joked they were travelling in circles. Meeting the proprietors of each inn provided the only clue they were heading in the right direction. Curiously, their demeanours were similar, but Nathan supposed they had to be of a particular breed willing to work in such conditions.

For days, they met only a few travellers, and the inns were favourably deserted. Consequently, the shared sleeping quarters were quiet. This evening, however, they were met by a massive trader's convoy travelling in the opposite direction. The inn was packed, and Nathan envisioned their sleeping arrangements to be insufferable.

"You itchy?" Brohm asked him while eating yet another bowl of beef stew.

Nathan found himself scratching his arm. He smoothed the material of his sleeve and shrugged in reply.

"I noticed you've been scratching for a while now," Brohm continued, pointing at Nathan's arm with a spoon. "Isn't that where your bite was?"

"Yeah, but it's fine."

That was a lie, but Brohm accepted it as truth and turned his attention back to his meal. The itch had manifested so gradually, Nathan had no idea when it started. But now, being reminded of it, his need to scratch grew. He didn't dare pull up his sleeve to examine the old wound, and he hadn't changed his clothes in days. No one had. Given the inadequate accommodations, there was nowhere to bathe or wash clothing. Everyone was filthy—an unspoken understanding during this leg of the journey. Cormac stated crossing the pass took five days, and others they spoke to corroborated that fact. It was currently day four, so he hoped they would reach the city by tomorrow evening. He ardently awaited a bath. At this point, even a frigid stream would feel great.

Nathan managed to achieve some sleep on the creaky bed, but it was short-lived. He woke in the middle of the night to a chorus of snores, and his full bladder demanded attention. With a sigh, he pulled back the blanket and padded toward the exit. A low-burning lantern hung just outside, and he took it to not stumble in the dark toward the outhouse.

After finishing his business, he ambled along the path with no interest in returning to bed. The mountain air, crisp and fresh, filled his lungs—a stark contrast to the stuffy and ripe sleeping quarters. With the low moon hidden by mountain peaks, a multitude of winking stars took centre stage, covering the heavens.

The urge to itch returned. Crouching to place the lantern on the ground, he pulled back his sleeve and winced at the sight. The scar tissue of pinhole teethmarks looked red and raw, though considering the warm lamplight, it was hard to discern the reality of the discolouration. He rubbed it gently,

temporarily soothing the itch. Touching it brought no pain, so he assumed it couldn't be too bad.

The familiar sound of daemon wings disrupted his attention. Looking up, Theodrik's distinct shape stood out against the canopy of stars. It glided through the air gracefully before landing among the nearby pines. Nathan headed in that direction, leaving the lantern behind on the path between the inn and outhouse.

He blindly stumbled his way through the boughs until he caught sight of Theodrik's glowing ember eyes. He froze for a moment, doubting he'd ever grow accustomed to the sight, but then used them as a guide toward the hunkered daemon.

"Hello, Nathan," it said softly as he approached. "I trust your travels fare well."

Due to the tight space, Nathan was forced to stand beside Theodrik—closer than was comfortable. "Yeah, everything's good with us. How about you?"

The daemon nodded. "It has been a pleasant journey. We have been travelling through fertile grounds. I have not gone hungry." It smiled again, revealing its dreadful teeth.

Nathan shied away, leaning into a prickly bough. "What have you been eating? You're . . . I hope you're not eating people."

Theodrik appeared amused by the idea. "Of course not. I know your kind view me as a monster, but I do have standards."

"I didn't mean to offend."

"No offence taken. And to answer your question, I have been enjoying the many manner of wild beasts roaming the countryside." Theodrik tilted its head, its burning eyes piercing through him. "I feel you mean to ask something of importance."

Nathan's eyes darted about, refusing to return its gaze. "What gives you that idea?"

"It is written on your face—clear for all to see—a disquiet within you that refuses to relinquish control. Please, speak your mind."

Nathan sighed. "It's about that iratxo bite. You asked if there were any lingering effects, and I said no. That . . . wasn't the truth."

Hesitant concern drew across Theodrik's features. "Nathan, please describe what has happened."

"Last winter, after it healed, sometimes I felt stabbing pain in my arm and chest. Then I fell into that waking coma. When I recovered a few weeks ago, everything was fine, but these past few days, the bite has started itching." He rolled up his sleeve. In the dim light of Theodrik's glowing eyes, he could barely discern the scars. "You can't see it—"

"I can see quite clearly. May I?" it asked, reaching out to touch his arm.

Nathan held it out. As before, with surprising care, Theodrik cradled his arm in its clawed hands, hunkering down further to inspect the scars.

"This appears quite different from when I last examined it."

"I know. What does this mean?"

A rumbling emerged deep within Theodrik—a long, heavy sigh. "If you had consulted with your healers when the pain began, they may have been able to neutralize it."

"But . . . not now?"

"I am sorry, Nathan. What you are experiencing is the final stage of the toxin. It is only a matter of time before you succumb to its effects."

He chuckled nervously. "There's gotta be something I can do. Etton Crossing is a big city. There's bound to be healers who can do something."

Theodrik shrugged despondently. "Anything is possible, but I do not wish to give you false hope. In my land, no healer can arrest the late effects of the toxin, and these are healers who are quite familiar with iratxos."

Nathan looked at his arm. "What if . . . I have it amputated?"

Theodrik shook its head. "It would do no good. The toxin is within your essence, your whole body."

Nathan felt dizzy and fell to his knees on the bed of dry pine needles. Their scent, always a comfort to him, did little to soothe him now.

"How long do I have? What'll happen to me?"

Theodrik sat, yet still towered before him. "Like all aspects of the toxin, it is a slow process. The stinging pain you experienced will return, however, it will grow progressively worse. By the end, you will lose the ability to use your muscles. You will not be able to take a breath. You will suffocate."

Nathan shut his eyes. "Please let this be a nightmare," he whispered. "Just wake up." He took a deep breath, cognizant of the fact he was able to do so. The fragrant pine needles filled his senses, and he tried his best to calm himself, but a growing knot in his stomach fought against him.

"I am sorry, Nathan. The advice I give you is to make the best of the time you have left."

"Please don't mention this to anyone, okay? Brohm can't know."

Theodrik shook his head, appalled by the statement. "He cares deeply for you. He is your knight. You cannot hide such a fact from him."

Nathan stifled a sob. "I can't do that to him. I want our time left together to be good. If he knew, he'd just worry."

Theodrik rumbled a sigh again.

"I'll tell him when I can't hide the symptoms anymore," Nathan said.

"While I do not agree, it is your choice to make. I will not utter a word."

"Thank you, Theodrik."

The daemon stood. "I am sorry to have caused all this pain, Nathan. My existence here is the root cause of all of this."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but you're just as much a victim, brought here against your will."

"There should be solace in the knowledge that those responsible are dead, yet I feel none."

“Cormac, our guide, once said death is the easy way out.”

Theodrik offered a solemn nod. “Wise words.”

It scaled the pine trees, their boughs bending under its weight. Upon reaching the top, it leapt into the air, catching the wind within its wings, and soared into the night.

* * *

By late afternoon the following day, they’d managed to break free of the narrow mountain pass. From their high vantage point and with the western sun at their back, their destination—Etton Crossing—stood on the horizon, commanding their attention. Massive, towering walls enclosed the circular city, with farmlands surrounding it. The mountain range extended in an arc toward the north end of the city, however its peaks were diminished to craggy, copper-hued bluffs.

They’d finally arrived, but reaching the city meant descending a series of switchback roads along the mountainside. This slowed their progress significantly. Upon their arrival at the bottom, the sun had nestled itself within the mountain peaks, painting a vast, jagged shadow across the city and surrounding countryside. A growing patchwork of squat buildings hugged the side of the road the closer they reached the city. General stores, taverns, and inns all vied for the attention of exhausted travellers, but their ramshackle presence did nothing to attract Nathan. After over a fortnight of travel, and with more coin he’d ever amassed in his lifetime, he wanted to spoil himself.

The sturdy stone walls of the city grew to massive heights as they rode closer. Only now could Nathan truly appreciate their grandeur. The western entrance—rising up to an archway many storeys high, and wide enough to comfortably accommodate many horse-drawn carts—beckoned them. However, before they could reach it, a massive iron portcullis was lowering to bar their way, and the three spurred their horses in hopes of making it through.

No such luck. Brohm and Cormac looked on as Nathan approached one of the armoured guards standing outside the gate.

“We’d like passage into the city.”

The guard adjusted the grip on his halberd and eyed him passively. “You got your pass?”

“Pass?” Nathan asked. “No. How do we get them?”

The guard thumbed over his shoulder. “You can get visitor passes at the main government building, centre of the city. Giant domed place. You can’t miss it.”

Nathan laughed incredulously. “How are we supposed to get a pass if we can’t get in?”

“Sorry, city gates are closed sundown to sunup. You need a pass to enter

during those times. Come back tomorrow morning." He pointed back the way they'd come. "There's plenty of inns to stay the night."

Nathan huffed his annoyance, but nodded respectfully to the guard. It wasn't his fault the city had absurd rules. Wearing a long face, he returned to Brohm and Cormac.

"I was looking forward to staying somewhere nice tonight," he said.

Brohm shrugged. "Don't worry, l'il buddy. As long as the bed is comfy, we'll live."

Without much trouble, they managed to find a decent inn to rest their weary heads. As before, Cormac had his own room, and Nathan and Brohm shared another. While no bath services were available, hot water, lavender soap, and soft towels were provided in their private room. The two stripped bare as soon as the door was shut, and standing in the warm lamplight, they washed the dusty road from their bodies.

Nathan, having briefly forgotten his fate, was reminded again upon scrubbing his arms. The hot water across the angry scars felt good, and for a time, the itching was gone.

Now clean and dry, all Nathan wanted was Brohm's touch. He led the big man to bed—inordinately more comfortable than any they'd slept on recently, and a faint reminder of their night at Remich. Brohm moaned in mock rapture as he stretched out, eliciting a chuckle from Nathan as he snuggled up against him.

"It's nice just us again, yuh?" Brohm said.

"It is," Nathan replied, trailing a finger across his broad chest. "I've been thinking . . . if you managed to escape Helmsley Keep without me, where you think you'd be now?"

Brohm shifted to look Nathan in the eye. "Without you? I don't even wanna think about that."

"But let's say you got away. What would you do?"

Brohm's brows knitted in bewilderment. "I dunno. It doesn't matter. We're here, now. Together." He wrapped Nathan up in his arms. "Why would you ask that?"

Nathan blinked against the risk of tears. "Sorry. I don't know." He nuzzled his neck, kissed it. "I can't imagine what I'd do without you, though."

He rested his head on Brohm's chest, listening to the powerful beat of his heart. His arm itched again, but he refused to acknowledge it. Weighing the pros and cons, he wasn't sure he could bear keeping it a secret from Brohm. It was deception against the only person he loved, but nothing could be gained by revealing the truth.

He'd tell him when the time was right.

Chapter Seven

With the sun in their eyes, the trio rode through Etton Crossing's open portcullis. Nathan marvelled at the city walls of neatly chiselled stone, four metres thick. With well-worn cobbles underfoot, they threaded their way through dense foot traffic—citizens making their way in and out of the city. Beyond the entrance, an open plaza funnelled people toward a web of arterial streets leading deeper into the city.

"Do you know which way it is to the university?" Nathan asked Cormac.

"Yes, 'tis amongst trees. Easy to spot if we head in that direction," he said, pointing southeast.

Cormac took the lead. Meanwhile, Nathan did his best to mentally map their location and make note of memorable landmarks. The first district they rode through was a marketplace. Sellers hawked their wares from stalls lining the street, followed by proper shops trading in higher quality goods. The farther they travelled, the more distinguished the storefronts appeared. Ahead stood another plaza, exhibiting busts of various people at its centre. Bronze plaques heralded each statue, but they didn't pass close enough to read them. Perhaps they were commemorative in nature, or memorials. Nearby, a signpost pointed them toward the university.

"Hold up," Brohm said. "Reckon we find a place to stay first."

Cormac nodded in agreement. "Yes. We don't want to be burdened by all our belongings."

Brohm pointed at a building with a smirk on his face. "How about there? It looks pretty fancy."

Nathan followed his finger to find an extravagant hotel at the far end of the plaza. Clad with a sleek marble façade and standing five storeys tall, each suite had its own private terrace. Nathan scoffed at the exorbitance of it all, imagining the suites must be equally ostentatious. Given his circumstances, this would be his only chance in his short life to experience how the privileged demanded this level of comfort.

"Very fancy," he said with a wide grin. "Let's do it."

"Oh, no no no," Cormac pleaded. "'Tis too much."

"Don't worry," Nathan said. "We can afford it."

Cormac raised his hands. "No, I thank you for the offer, but I cannot stay in such a place. I'll find my own accommodations." He turned his horse back the way they came.

"Wait! You don't have any money," Nathan called out.

"'Tis not a problem," Cormac said over his shoulder with a smile. "I've lived many years without coin. I know this city. There are many places for those such as myself."

"Suit yourself," Brohm said with a shrug.

They approached the hotel's covered colonnade, whose pillars were marble as well. As they dismounted, three porters hurried to their side.

"Good morning, sirs," the lead man said. "We would be pleased to accept your baggage. Your horses will be well-tended to, of course."

After the rude treatment they'd received at Remich, Nathan was taken aback by their aggressive politeness. He didn't like the idea of their belongings out of sight in others' hands, but he fought against it. This was how the other side lived.

"Thank you," Nathan replied. "There's just one bag I'll take with me." He unbuckled one of the saddlebags containing their wealth. Whether these porters were trustworthy or not, he wasn't going to risk it.

"Of course, of course," the porter said, bowing his head. "Please make your way in. Your effects will be delivered to your rooms."

Brohm caught his eye, and judging by his expression, was enjoying the experience so far. They climbed the marble steps to the entrance and were ushered in by the doorman. A plush, crimson runner led them through an ever-widening corridor toward the front desk clerk. The man, immaculately dressed, looked on expectantly as they approached.

"Greetings, and welcome to the Amberley Hotel. Do you have a reservation?"

"No, we don't," Nathan said. "In fact, we don't know how long we'll be staying. It could be a while. We'll just need one suite."

"That's no trouble at all, sir. We have guests who stay for months at a time." The clerk presented a large registration book, an inkwell, and a pen. "Sign in, please."

Nathan picked up the pen and hesitated a moment. He was exhausted pretending to be someone else. They were so far away from all the trouble of their past. He decided to risk it and sign his true name. He passed the pen to Brohm, who glanced at him wearily upon seeing the signature. Pen to paper, Brohm held still a moment before signing his real name below Nathan's.

With a thank you, the clerk pulled the book away and stated the daily fee. Nathan nearly choked, but managed to force a smile. To give the appearance money was no object, he paid in advance for seven days. If the clerk had any hidden reservations about the two grubby men standing before him, he had no qualms now with their coin in hand.

"Do you have a place to take a bath?" Brohm asked.

"Of course, sir. Each suite has its own bathroom. Hot water can be pumped on request." One eyebrow shot up. "Would you like that now?"

Brohm let out a laugh. "Definitely."

"What about laundry service?" Nathan asked.

"Yes. Any articles of clothing you would like laundered and pressed can be brought to the area to my right. Any other questions?"

They glanced at each other and then shook their heads. In a firm manner,

the clerk raised a minuscule bell from the desk and daintily rang it. A servant appeared out of nowhere, and the clerk handed him a key.

"Please take our guests to suite 305."

"Yes," the servant said before addressing Nathan and Brohm. "This way, sirs."

They were led beyond the front desk to an open and curved marble staircase. Upon reaching the landing of the third level, the marble floor gave way to lush carpet. Nathan glanced back in hopes they weren't tracking in mud from their boots. With a flourish, the servant unlocked and opened the oaken door, and commenced a well-rehearsed speech describing the amenities of their suite, but Nathan was too awestruck to hear him.

The darkly primed wooden floors were covered by a series of carpets, intricately woven with subtly coloured designs. The walls, where not decorated by paintings, were adorned with deep burgundy fabrics—a faint reminder of their own bedroom back at the guildhouse. The four-poster bed was so large, it was more like a raised platform lined with endless pillows. The aforementioned bathroom, intricately tiled, contained a deep copper tub at its centre.

To Nathan, this was extravagance bordering on overindulgence.

"Any questions, sirs?" the servant asked, holding out the key to them.

Brohm glanced at Nathan, who was still glancing around in a daze.

"Nope, all good. Thanks," he replied, digging into his pocket and handing the man a coin.

The servant left as swiftly as he came, leaving the two of them alone.

Nathan couldn't help but chuckle. "This is crazy. I guess the price makes sense."

Brohm waved away his concern. "Who cares about that? It's ours to spend. Let's enjoy it, yuh?"

Nathan proceeded to remove his boots in fear of ruining the carpets, and motioned for Brohm to do the same. Another knock at the door announced two porters with their belongings. They were quick to place their rucksacks and saddlebags on a table near the door, and once given their tip, disappeared just as briskly.

Nathan explored deeper into the suite, approaching the double glass doorway leading to the terrace outside. From their vantage point, they had an excellent view of the tree-lined plaza. The hum of the city from this height was peculiarly comforting.

Brohm came up behind him, loosely wrapping his arms around Nathan's waist. "I could get used to this," he mused.

"Let's stay here. I mean, not *here*—we're not that rich. But we could get an apartment in the city. We could be us again. Nathan and Brohm, not Whitter and Sid. I'm so tired of those names."

Brohm laid his head on Nathan's shoulder. "Yuh, I noticed that when you signed. But we can't stay. We've got the guildhouse to run."

Nathan turned to him. “We got it started, and it practically runs itself now. Do they really need us?”

“Dunno, but I don’t wanna abandon them. ’Sides, what would we do here? We’d get bored after a while, yuh?”

Nathan knew he was right. “A long vacation, then?”

“Yuh, that could work—”

Another knock at the door interrupted him, and he lumbered toward the door with Nathan in tow.

A short woman nodded in greeting. “Your bathwater is ready, sir.”

Brohm glanced up and down the empty hallway in confusion. No one was carrying any water. The woman smiled at his reaction.

“This must be your first visit here. May I enter?”

Brohm nodded, moving aside to let her in, and she led them into the bathroom.

“Hot water is pumped directly to each suite as needed,” she said while pulling a copper pipe down from above the tub and turned a valve. Steaming hot water gushed out.

Brohm watched with giant eyes. “Magick.”

A polite laugh escaped her lips. “Nothing of the sort. Just a steam-powered pumping system. When the tub is full, just close this spigot. You’ll find clean towels and soaps in that cabinet. When you’re done, there’s a drain in the floor. Enjoy.”

She left the two of them to watch the water cascade into the rapidly filling tub. Brohm turned to Nathan wearing a particularly serious face.

“Strip. Now!”

Nathan burst to laughter and undressed. Brohm practically ripped off his own clothes. With moans of pleasure, they settled into the tub. Water still showered from above, and Brohm manoeuvred to sit underneath the stream.

“Reckon I could get used to this,” he said as water cascaded down his smiling face.

* * *

They finished their soak—ending in moans of a different sort—followed by a leisurely lunch and a nap. By midafternoon, they’d managed to get back on track with their initial plan. The clothing they’d changed into was cleaner, but not what Nathan would consider presentable. Nothing could be done about it, however, as their remaining clothes had already been delivered to the laundry.

In short order, they rode their horses south along a wide avenue lined with posh residences. Ahead, a cluster of massive trees forced the street to break off in two directions.

“That must be it,” Nathan said.

The trees were unlike any he’d seen before. Their large and partially translucent fronds filtered the sunlight, bathing the university’s grassy grounds in a gentle glow. Stone benches beckoned passersby to stop and enjoy the ambience. Students sat and read, and others chatted privately in small groups. A gravel path cut through the middle of the park, leading to the university’s circular, multilevel building, supported by fluted columns.

They found stables around the far side of the building, but were at a loss where to find this scholar within such a large site. They returned to the front entrance on foot. Filtered sunlight passed through the massive windows, illuminating the expansive and open vestibule. At the far end were matching windows, revealing the university’s true shape—not a complete circle, but a ring, with another inviting park at its centre.

While they glanced around like lost children, Brohm pointed at what appeared to be an administrative wing. A woman sitting behind a desk watched passively as they approached.

“Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” Nathan said. “We’re looking for a scholar named Rabiah Charters. We’re not sure she’s here, though.”

An astonished expression crossed her face. “Yes, Miss Charters is here, but unless you have an appointment, you’ve a mountain to climb if you expect an audience with her.”

“Umm . . . could you be more specific?”

“She doesn’t receive visitors.”

“Well, if that’s the case”—Nathan pulled Lorne’s sealed note from within his jerkin—“I’m hoping this message will change her mind.”

“Very well. I’ll make sure it’s included with her messages.”

She held out her hand, but Nathan kept it out of reach.

“No, you don’t understand,” he said. “We need to deliver it to her personally.”

The woman shook her head and gestured with insistence to hand it over. Brohm nudged him aside and loomed over the woman.

“Just tell us where she is.”

She shied away from Brohm’s glare. “I trust Miss Charters isn’t in any trouble?”

Nathan surreptitiously touched the small of Brohm’s back, manoeuvring him to give some ground. “No. We’re in need of her help and expertise.”

The woman spent a dour moment judging them before finally rising from her chair.

“Follow me, then. She’s in H wing, but it will be easier for me to show you exactly where.”

She led them to a wide concourse, its passage following the gentle curve of the university. At regular intervals, doorways led into a deeper maze of corridors. Above each doorway were letters carved into stone tablets, denoting

each wing.

"H is tucked away," she said, "meant for permanent residents and scholars who receive funding from the university. Miss Charters studies the workings of magick. From what I've heard, she's quite good at getting results. I suppose that can excuse her eccentricities, but if you ask me, good manners should never be above anyone." That last statement was aimed at Brohm, but her point was lost on him. He was busy gazing at the architecture.

They passed through the threshold marked with an H. The stone hallway, narrower and darker, led to a series of entryways. Most of the wooden doors were closed, each denoted by a nameplate. The few open doors they passed exposed gloomy rooms, desks covered with tomes and parchments. Behind each desk sat a person deep in concentration.

"Here we are," she announced with a small flourish of the hand. "Best of luck to you."

Without another word, she turned and left them. The door was closed, its nameplate declaring *Rabiah Charters*. Nathan knocked, its echo travelling down the hallway.

There was no answer, nor any interior sound, but considering the wooden door's sturdy nature, Nathan wasn't sure he'd be able to hear movement from within. He knocked again with a touch more force.

Nothing.

"Miss Charters?" Nathan called out.

An aggravated growl replied from the other side, followed by the scrape of wooden legs on stone.

"Who is it?" demanded a woman's voice.

"My name is Nathan, along with my partner, Brohm. We've travelled from the west in search of your knowledge and help. Could we speak to you?"

The answer was immediate. "No. Now leave me be!"

Nathan laughed in disbelief at her anger. Brohm traded places to try his version of diplomacy.

"We're not going anywhere, lady. You know a guy named Lorne? He's told us about you."

"Lorne?" Her reply was skeptical.

"Yuh. Now open the door."

A scowling man emerged from the hallway. "Some of us are trying to work. Keep it down or I'll call the guard to remove you," he said before returning to his office and slamming the door.

Nathan knocked again on Rabiah's door. "Please let us in so we can explain things. We have a message Lorne wrote to you."

"Signatures can be forged," she said.

Nathan pulled the letter free again, touching the seagull wax seal. "This one isn't," he replied with certainty.

A heavy latch slid free on the other side, and the door opened a crack. The room was dim like the others. A face, hugged by shoulder-length hair, peeked

out from the darkness. Rabiah was younger and more handsome than Nathan envisioned.

"Well, you're a big drink of water," she stated, looking Brohm up and down suggestively.

A confused grunt was all he offered in reply.

"Big *and* dumb? Okay, we'll have some fun later." She turned her attention to Nathan. "Let's see this letter."

He handed it to her. Upon seeing the seal, Rabiah's expression changed. The door she'd been holding was forgotten, and it slowly swung open. In contrast to the other offices, this room was orderly despite being stacked with books and artifacts. Candles and strangely coloured glowing baubles fought against the dark.

"Where'd you get this seal?" she demanded, pointing at the letter.

Nathan shrugged. "I told you. Lorne wrote the letter."

Rabiah gave them a suspicious glance while breaking the seal. She read the letter, stared at them with widening eyes, then read it again.

"We've travelled a long way. Please tell me you can help us," Nathan said.

With surprising strength, she grabbed the two of them and pulled them in. The door slammed shut, and she bolted the lock into place.

"Reckon that's a 'yuh'," Brohm said, straightening his shirt.

"Damn right," she said. "What this says is true? You've got"—she whispered conspiringly—"you've got a daemon here? In our realm?"

Nathan gave a sober nod.

"Gods!" she exclaimed as she held the letter over a candle, waiting for it to catch fire. "Who knows of this?"

"A few people," Nathan said.

Rabiah dropped the letter in a nearby bowl filled with ashes. "And you trust them?"

Nathan licked his lips. "*Trust* is a decisive word. If you mean, do I trust them enough to keep the knowledge to themselves? Yes, I do."

Rabiah pursed her lips. "I suppose that'll have to do."

"Can we trust *you*?" Brohm asked pointedly.

"Yes," she replied, cocking her head as though it were obvious. "So, when can I see it?"

"See? What?" Nathan asked.

"The daemon," she whispered.

"We don't have time for social calls. It needs to be sent back to the hells where it belongs. These small creatures have been appearing out of nowhere —"

"Iratxos?" she asked excitedly.

"Yes," Nathan drawled. "How do you know of them?"

"You could say I have . . ." Rabiah pondered a moment. "I have a fascination with the many worlds beyond our veil. I've studied many

historical accounts of daemons and other creatures that exist on other planes of existence."

"Okay. So I assume you're aware as long as this daemon remains here, iratxos will continue to invade our land? They've already hurt a lot of people."

Her excitement shifted to suspicion. "Really? I wasn't aware of that. But yes, I've read accounts of those beasts. Animalistic in nature, and they hunt in packs. Quite dangerous."

Nathan found himself scratching at his arm again and forced himself to stop.

"So where are you holding this daemon?" Rabiah asked with renewed enthusiasm.

"We're not holding it anywhere," Nathan said. "It's free to do what it wants, but instead decided to follow me."

A veneer of jealousy washed over her face. "Why you?"

"It's a long story, and not important."

"I beg to differ," she said with a scoff.

"All that matters is it told us of the iratxos and the reason they're here. It asked for our help. Brohm and I are part of the Adventurer's Guild, but we've taken it upon ourselves to get this daemon home. In doing so, we'll save a lot of lives."

Rabiah nodded, but seemed unconvinced. "As much as it pains me to agree to such a thing, I'm willing to help."

"Pains you? Why?" Brohm asked.

She blinked at him, laughing. "You're saying a daemon is following you around like a pet—a daemon of untold power—and instead of using that to your advantage, you want to take its hand and send it home?"

"People are getting killed because of it," Brohm said.

Rabiah tsked and waved a hand. "Just peasants, I'm sure. They fuck like rabbits. They grow back."

"That doesn't make them any less—"

"Anyway, I agreed to help. But before anything happens, I demand to meet this daemon."

Brohm huffed and deferred to Nathan.

"Fine, but we'll need to meet outside the city at night," Nathan said. "That's when it comes out of hiding. I think the bluffs to the north would be our safest bet."

"Reckon we need passes to get through the gate at night, yuh?" Brohm said.

Nathan cursed under his breath. "What's involved in getting those passes?" he asked Rabiah.

She raised an eyebrow and offered a shrewd smile. "You're in luck."

From a small drawer at her desk, she pulled out two small bronze tokens and handed one to each of them. Rectangular in shape, they were stamped

with an encircled cross. Below were the words: Etton Crossing Gate Pass.

Nathan hefted it in his hand. “Why do you have these? Is this even legal?”

Rabiah shrugged noncommittally. “I think you’ll find it’s best not to ask.”

* * *

Nathan and Brohm tucked into the shadow of night, away from the street lamplight. Before them stood the city’s massive northern portcullis, guarded by a few armoured men. They chatted amongst themselves casually, sometimes laughing, their voices echoing against the nearby buildings. The streets were empty, a fact Nathan found strange taking into account the size of the city, but then he considered their distance from the pubs. The buildings here appeared to be more business-oriented. Owners usually lived above their shops, but that wasn’t the case here.

The night was warm, the air still. Nathan felt a pull to be free of the city walls, and tapped his foot impatiently while they waited for Rabiah to appear. His arm was especially bothersome this night, becoming more than just an itch. Now, it felt like small pins digging into his flesh. He tried his best to soothe it without Brohm noticing.

“Finally,” Brohm said under his breath, pointing at a figure in tight clothing.

Despite only meeting Rabiah once, she had a distinctive shape that was hard to mistake for anyone else. They emerged from the darkness and advanced on her. She wore a tight leather outfit that shone in the lamplight. Despite showing no skin, her attire left nothing to the imagination.

“Good evening, boys,” she said in a sultry tone.

A chuckle escaped Nathan. “What are you wearing, and why?”

Rabiah pouted. “You don’t like it? I always aim to dress to impress.”

“I hope you’re not trying to impress us. And I doubt Theodrik is attracted to human women.”

She blinked at both of them. “That’s its name?”

“We wanted to call it something.”

She cackled, her voice reaching the gate and catching the attention of the guards. Brohm, not wanting to stand out more than they already did, took the lead and gestured for Nathan and Rabiah to follow. They approached the guards, who watched them with curiosity the entire time.

“Hullo,” Brohm said, reaching into his pocket to show the bronze token.

“Little late to be outside the gate, innit?” one guard asked, eyeing them dubiously. His gaze held on Rabiah uncomfortably long.

Nathan wanted this over now, and pulled out his own token. “We just want to enjoy the stars without the light of the city is all.”

Rabiah revealed her own token, pulled from a small pocket on her leg.

She leered at the guard. “That’s right. All we want are the stars.”

She was a terrible liar, but the man seemed too lost in her outfit to notice.

“Open ’er up,” he called out to a guard on the parapet.

The massive gate groaned as it rose, holding in place just high enough for them to pass through. On the other side, two more armoured men with halberds watched Rabiah’s backside intently, much to her pleasure. Nathan’s eyes gradually adjusted to the starlight, and he surveyed the rocky terrain ahead of them.

“Where are we meeting it?” Rabiah asked.

“I’m not sure,” Nathan said sheepishly. “It can track my location, and—”

She grabbed his arm roughly, right on the old wound. He grimaced in pain, but hoped in the dark neither would notice.

“What do you mean it can track you?” she asked. “What exactly is your relationship with this thing?”

He pulled his arm free, cradling it loosely. “I told you. It’s a long story. Suffice to say, it should notice me out of the city and take that as a cue to meet us.”

Another moment of jealousy flashed across her face before smoothing over with a smile. She pointed a jesting finger at him. “You better share that story soon.”

“No promises,” Nathan replied as he turned back to the cliffs, looking for a way up.

They reached the incline, finding natural paths amid the rubble. The effort of the climb kept Rabiah silent for the time being, which Nathan appreciated. He tried to ignore the pinpricks on his arm, a painful reminder of what was to come. Dread filled his belly, thinking of the day he could no longer hide it, forcing him to tell Brohm the truth. In his mind’s eye, he saw the woe on the big man’s face.

Out of breath, they reached a bluff overlooking the city and surrounding farmlands. From their position, the massive walls did little to hide the buildings within.

Brohm huffed, wiping sweat from his brow. “Reckon this is far enough, yuh?”

Nathan nodded, and then looked to Rabiah. “Are you regretting wearing that leather now?”

She shot him an irritable glance in reply. They leaned against a rock, catching their breath. Unlike at ground level, a mild breeze brought some relief here, cooling their faces.

“What kind of name is Theodrik for a daemon?” Rabiah asked after a few minutes of silence.

At first, Nathan was reticent to answer, but figured it didn’t matter if she knew the truth. “It was the name of the alchemist who summoned it. Brohm and I wanted to call it something.”

“So it didn’t have a name?” she asked.

Nathan soothed his arm again. “It does, but apparently we wouldn’t be able to pronounce it.”

Rabiah chuckled in spite of herself. “Of course. That makes sense. But Theodrik is hardly a name of power. It’s demeaning.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that name. Anyway, I wanted to call it something other than daemon. I think that’s *more* demeaning.”

Time passed sluggishly. Brohm wandered the clifftop and explored hidden nooks before finding a suitable rock to act as a seat. Odd animal calls broke the silence in the distance. On occasion, gusts of wind would stir up eddies of fine dirt. Nathan assumed Theodrik wasn’t going to arrive, only to catch sight of its familiar shape against the stars.

“There it is,” he said, pointing it out to the others.

Rabiah immediately stood up, brushing red dust from her outfit. “I see it.” The nervous excitement in her voice was palpable.

Brohm joined them as the daemon wheeled a few times before making its steady descent toward their position. Massive wings fanned out as it landed, buffeting the ground. Debris flew up, forcing them to shield their faces until Theodrik had settled and folded up its wings. It lumbered toward them, burning eyes lighting its way.

“Good evening.”

Brohm raised a hand in greeting.

“Hi, Theodrik,” Nathan said. “We’d like you to meet Rabiah. She has the know-how to send you home.”

Rabiah dropped to a knee, eyes cast down in reverence. “It’s an honour to meet you . . . Theodrik.” She clearly had trouble speaking its temporary name.

The daemon laughed, a rumble deep within its chest. “Please stand, Rabiah. It is I who should kneel before you.”

She did as requested with prudence, but kept her eyes averted. Theodrik mimicked the bow as best it could, however its eyes remained locked on her.

“It is a wonder that Nathan and Brohm have found one with the knowledge we seek. Even more surprising, that you would be willing to aid us. I thank you.”

Her eyes wandered up slightly, gazing at its clawed toes. “I’ve great respect for your kind. Never could I have hoped to consider this moment a reality for me.”

Theodrik let out a grunt of curiosity. “I have heard of humans who worship our kind. Are you one of them?”

She cleared her throat, making the slightest glance toward Nathan to her left, and Brohm to her right. “Yes, I suppose I do,” she replied.

The daemon rose to its feet. “I have never understood why. Would you be so kind to explain it to me?”

Rabiah made a choking sound, unsure how to respond. Nathan assumed it was akin to a god asking a priest the same question.

“There are some of my kind who revel in being worshipped by humans,”

Theodrik said. “They devise acts of violence to be performed at their command. In some ways, we are not dissimilar from humans. Many of us care for our fellows, while select others thrive in chaos. The daemons that have plagued your world are those select few, and they are not to be trusted.”

It reached out with a single claw. Touching Rabiah’s chin with delicate precision, it lifted her head to make eye contact. She stared into the fiery orbs with equal parts fear and wanton passion.

“I will make this clear,” it continued. “I am not one of those select few. I am not to be worshipped.”

“But look at you,” Rabiah said breathlessly. “Such power demands it.”

Theodrik pulled its hand away, a quizzical smile revealing the tips of its sharp teeth. “I suppose I will never comprehend the awe and wonder some humans have for our kind. The fear? That, I understand. Our appearance is normally quite troubling to humans.” It gestured toward Nathan and Brohm. “My first meeting with them was not ideal, and upon reflection, I realized my actions had reinforced that fear.”

Rabiah smiled deviously. “What happened?”

Before the daemon could reply, Nathan interrupted. “It doesn’t matter. You’ve met Theodrik now. That was the deal. You meet it, you help us.”

Theodrik’s eyes widened. “Ah, stipulations. Does this meeting satisfy your request, Rabiah?”

“Yes,” she replied with a stutter.

It was obvious to Nathan she wanted more, but couldn’t gather the resolve to speak it aloud. Theodrik caught it as well.

“Fret not. We will meet again before my departure.” It crouched down again and reached out to touch her arm, almost a caress. “I thank you for helping Nathan, Brohm, and myself. I miss my kin, and with your help, we will be reunited. Thank you.”

She could only nod in reply, once again unable to meet its gaze. Theodrik rose and addressed Nathan and Brohm.

“This location is ideal. You chose wisely. I hope that the next time we meet here, it will be for my exodus from this land.”

“That’s the hope,” Nathan said. “Stay out of sight, okay?”

“Of course, Nathan. I am hiding well amid the peaks to the north. I bid you all a good night.”

Theodrik turned, and with a lumbering gait, dove off the cliff. Its wings flashed open, lifting it up with powerful strokes. The trio watched silently as the black silhouette rose higher, turned north, and disappeared behind the craggy rock.

Rabiah releases an audible breath, as though she’d been holding it the entire time. “Well, that was . . . an experience.”

“Reckon not really what you expected?” Brohm asked.

She turned to him, abashed. “Was I that obvious?”

Nathan and Brohm chuckled.

“You made a fine impression, I’m sure,” Nathan said. “We’ve found that Theodrik is easy to please. Nothing like what we expected from a daemon.”

She looked up again, hoping to catch another glimpse of Theodrik in the sky. “Truer words were never spoken. Oh, but wasn’t it magnificent? Gods, to have such a being at my disposal.”

“It’s not a pet,” Brohm chided. “And I don’t care how friendly it seems. Reckon nobody can tell a daemon to do something it doesn’t wanna.”

Nathan recalled the alchemist and how he’d somehow managed to turn the daemon into Lord Helmsley’s slave. He pondered if Rabiah had the same knowledge. She was dangerous in her own way, of that he had no doubt. It didn’t mean she couldn’t be trusted, but he had to remain vigilant.

* * *

Muggy and hazy air smothered Nathan and Brohm the next morning. The bustling city crawled, a pace Nathan found more inviting. They decided to walk the short distance to the university, yet despite hiding within the shadow of tall buildings, Brohm was sweating in short order. A wave of cool air hit them upon entering the university, its stone structure providing relief from the weather. Yet by the time they were knocking at Rabiah’s door, the air clung uncomfortably to their damp skin.

A heavy latch disengaged, and the door opened a crack, revealing the dim void. Rabiah’s face peeked out, and upon seeing them, opened the door wide enough to let them in. As soon as they were through, she shut and bolted the door again.

“Reckon someone’s gonna barge in here?” Brohm asked.

“You can never be too safe,” Rabiah replied with a fretful tone, returning to sit at her desk.

Unlike the day before, her workspace was now disorganized. Books had been pulled from shelves, some open, lying atop one another in haphazard fashion. Two chairs stood opposite the desk, and Nathan and Brohm took that as an invitation to sit.

“You’ve been busy this morning,” Nathan said.

“I haven’t slept yet,” she said, wiping her eyes. “After our meeting, I knew trying to sleep would be fruitless, so I came back here.”

“So, what’d we gotta do to send this daemon back home?” Brohm asked.

She turned her attention to him. “What you’re actually asking for is to open a portal between dimensions.”

“Okay,” he replied, annoyed by her pedantic response. “Can you do *that*?”

She glanced at the mound of books on her desk. “Yes . . . and no.”

Brohm let out a noisy sigh.

“Can you elaborate?” Nathan asked.

She directed their attention to the shelves bordering the room. They held books and scrolls, arranged neatly amid stone and metal curios, some of which glowed softly from within.

"We're surrounded by the knowledge you seek." With a smooth gesture, she pointed at a thick tome before her. "I can guide you to procure special crystals. They're crushed into a powder and used to draw symbols during the ritual."

Closing that book and pulling another to the top of the pile, she thumbed through the pages. "Based on our location and the stars, I can calculate the correct time when a portal can be safely opened."

"So what are you missing?" Nathan asked.

She closed the book, expelling a plume of dust. "I need to learn the spoken incantations, as well as how to draw the symbols. This information is deemed too dangerous to share, even for scholars such as myself. It's locked away."

Nathan perked up. "Locked? Where?"

She cleared her throat for dramatic effect. "The repository of forbidden knowledge."

Nathan and Brohm chuckled, and for the first time today, she smiled.

"I know. It's a silly name," she said. "That would be Edouard's doing."

"Who's that?" Brohm asked.

"I'd call him an overpaid librarian. For reasons I can't fathom, the university thought he was the right choice to oversee the safety and security of those books. Trouble is, he's also been given full authority over who can read their contents. Let's just say we don't get along, and so I've never gained access to the books I really want."

Nathan scoffed. "Can't you plead your case to someone higher up?"

She shook her head. "They don't want to hear it. They gave him the power, so he gets final say."

Nathan rubbed his chin with a thumb as he visualized his set of lockpicks —an important part of his past—hidden within a pocket of his rucksack. The idea of discarding them was too difficult to bear, and now he was pleased to have them.

"If I could get you in there, could you find the book?"

"I told you," she said. "They're locked up."

"I heard you. Locks aren't a problem for me."

A glimpse of hope twinkled in her eye. "Does that include magickly-held locks?"

Nathan's confidence was blown over, and he slumped his shoulders. That was enough for Rabiah to understand.

"Every lock's got a key, yuh?" Brohm chimed in. "Where's the key?"

"Around Edouard's neck," she said.

Nathan held up a hand. "Hold on. What if we're overthinking this? Why don't we explain the situation to him?"

Rabiah broke out into laughter, but it was far from jovial. “That idiot thinks I *want* to summon daemons. He doesn’t trust me. It’s the reason he refuses me access. And he doesn’t know you two. He’d just assume I hired you to con him.”

“Then we show him the daemon,” Brohm said. “Theodrik tells this Edouard guy it wants to go home, then he’ll have to believe us.”

She pondered his plan a moment, then grimaced as she spoke. “If you want to keep this a secret, I don’t know if that’ll work. I could see him reporting it, instead.”

Brohm let out an exasperated sigh and spoke under his breath. “Reckon we just end him and take the k—”

He stopped short upon seeing Nathan’s glare, but Rabiah appeared intrigued.

“Go on,” she cooed.

Brohm glanced at Nathan, looking for permission to speak his mind. With a roll of the eyes, Nathan bestowed it.

“People are getting killed because of these iratxos, yuh? And these things won’t stop coming until Theodrik is gone. If this Edouard is getting in the way of saving innocent folk—”

“Edouard is just as innocent,” Nathan muttered.

“I think I understand what big and tall is saying, though,” Rabiah said. “Sacrifice one for the sake of many?”

Brohm shrugged. “Makes sense, don’t it?”

Nathan stood, exasperated. “This is crazy. We don’t need to *kill* anyone. Worst case, we subdue him. Take the key. Get the book. Do the thing.”

Rabiah twisted her face. “That book we need? I’ve already asked for it more than once. He’ll know I’m involved as soon as he finds it missing. Listen, I’m all for helping you two out, but not at the risk of losing my position here. This is my life’s work.”

“Right. I get that,” Nathan said, flopping back into the chair. “There has to be another way to gather the information we need. That can’t be the only copy of the book.”

She shrugged in reply. “If there’s another copy, I don’t know where to find it.”

Brohm caught Nathan’s eye, and with a grim look, told him what needed to be done. Nathan vehemently shook his head.

“Care to share with the rest of the class?” Rabiah asked with a raised eyebrow.

Brohm turned to her. “Reckon there’s nothing else we can do. We deal with Edouard, permanently. Then we get the book, and you do your thing.”

Once again, she was keenly interested in the concept of Edouard’s demise. Nathan slumped his head in dismay, questioning why death always followed in their presence. Why their solutions usually involved bloodshed. He refused to believe this was their only option here.

“How about this,” he said. “I follow him home at night. Steal the key without him noticing. We get the book, and I replace the key before daybreak.”

They took a moment to digest the plan.

“He won’t notice one book missing if he never suspects anyone was there, right?” Nathan added.

Rabiah shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not.” She thought about it a moment more. “Probably not.”

“This is the sanest and safest choice,” Nathan said.

“And what happens if he catches you?” Brohm asked.

Nathan’s face darkened. “If I’m cornered, I’ll do what I have to, but I refuse to kill a defenceless man.”

Rabiah sulked, disappointed. Nathan wondered how they often managed to get involved with people of questionable moral fibre.

“Okay, let’s do this tonight,” Brohm said.

“Not so fast,” Rabiah blurted. “We only need that book for the last part.” She pushed a tome aside and opened the one underneath. “First, you need to fetch me those crystals I mentioned.”

“Something else we need to steal?” Nathan said in a teasing manner.

She eyed him with a smirk. “No, you’ll be getting these from the source.”

“That sounds far away,” Brohm said.

“Well, depending on how you view it, they’re equally nearby and infinitely far away.”

Brohm scratched his head. “I never was good at riddles.”

“Where exactly do we need to go?” Nathan asked.

“Fractional dimensions,” Rabiah stated, as if that explained everything. “These are spaces between the veil, unendingly varied and infinite in size.”

“Okay,” Nathan drawled. “What’s involved in getting to one of these places?”

“Compared to opening a portal to the hells? Quite simple.” She pointed at the book before her. “The way can be opened with chalk on stone and the right words spoken.”

“If it’s so easy, why is this the first time I’ve heard of these fractional dimensions?” Nathan asked.

“Because they serve no purpose to us. They’re like an endless deck of cards, continually shuffled. You can choose a card at any time, and that dimension will appear. Had you chosen a moment later, a completely different dimension would materialize. When you open a portal, the passage of time determines which dimension is chosen. From our position, once a dimension is missed, accessing it again is impossible. They’re infinite.”

Nathan took a moment to process the concept. “It sounds like a frightening way to get separated from our world.”

Rabiah presented a wan smile. “Indeed.”

“There’s crystals in these places?” Brohm asked.

“Yes. They’re black, nearly opaque. They tend to grow on rock formations in bunches. They’re quite small, so you’ll need to collect a fair number—”

Nathan raised a hand in confusion. “Wait. If these places are continuously changing, how do we get back?”

“I’ll hold the portal open from this side. It’s not difficult, but does require concentration. As I said, the deck is continuously shuffling, but by pulling a card, we keep it in our hand until we’re done with it. Rest assured, the portal between our world and that dimension will remain solid.”

“And you’ve done this before, yuh?” Brohm asked.

“Yes, I’ve opened these portals twice.”

Brohm turned to Nathan. “Reckon you ready for another adventure?”

Nathan smiled. “Yeah.” He looked to Rabiah. “When can we do this?”

“Midnight would be safest. We don’t want to be disturbed. Meet me tonight at the university’s front entrance.”

They rose from their seats, but Rabiah held a hand out to stop them. “This is just a precaution, but make sure you’re armed.”

Nathan instinctively touched the hilt of his dagger sheathed on his belt. “Should we be expecting trouble?”

Rabiah flipped through the book before her. “I’ve never seen them, but there are accounts of encountering fauna. They’ve always been docile and hide from visitors, but . . . like I said, just a precaution.”

“How big are they?” Brohm asked.

She shrugged. “Nothing is certain. It’s possible the dimension we investigate will be lifeless.”

“I think that answers everything, at least for now,” Nathan said before glancing at Brohm. “What about you?”

Brohm shook his head. “We’ll see you tonight, Rabiah.”

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “And just as well. My bed is calling me.”

* * *

After their time spent in the cool recesses of the university, the oppressive heat outdoors felt that much worse. The sun, now high in the sky, ate away at the protective shadows. By the time they’d reached their hotel, Brohm’s shirt was nearly soaked through with sweat. Within the lobby, the heat was held at bay, much to their relief.

The deck clerk waved to get their attention. “You have a message,” he stated, handing them a small envelope.

“Thanks,” Nathan said, “but who’s it from?”

“An older gentleman. Good day,” the clerk said, returning his attention

back to the task at hand.

They ambled toward the stairwell while Nathan opened the envelope. The small note was a message from Cormac, and Nathan spoke it aloud to Brohm.

"I hope you're enjoying your time together. Thank you again for your offer to stay, but this hotel is too lavish for me. I've found a place more to my liking, a hostel called The Wheel and Spoke in the northeast quarter. I've made arrangements with the owner to help him in exchange for food and board. If you need me for anything, seek me out there. Yours, Cormac."

Brohm let out a long sigh. "Reckon I *was* wrong about him. You kept telling me he was alright, but I just couldn't see it."

Nathan laid a hand on Brohm's shoulder. "Don't worry about it, big guy. You were trying to protect us. I can't fault you for that."

They retreated to their suite, and the day was spent lounging, napping, eating, bathing, and enjoying more carnal pleasures together. Deep into the night, Brohm risked opening the glass doors to the balcony. Humid air wafted in, and he closed it immediately with a grunt.

"It's still gross out," he stated.

Nathan sat on a plush foot rest and pulled on his boots. "As much as I appreciate your naked body, you should get dressed. Rabiah's expecting us soon."

While strapping on his dagger, he watched Brohm clothe himself and tighten his sword belt. It was a simple act he'd performed countless times, yet now, Nathan felt emotions bubble to the surface. He'd always imagined they'd be together for a long time, 'go on adventures' as Brohm put it, maybe even grow old together. At that thought, his arm tingled—a reminder he'd never have the opportunity to enjoy Brohm's company for much longer.

"You okay?" the big man asked as he approached.

Nathan forced a smile. "Sure. Just wondering what we'll be facing tonight. Should I bring my bow?"

Brohm shrugged. "Reckon so. Better to have it than not, yuh?"

It was ideal they were heading out at night. While being armed in the city wasn't a problem, it did raise suspicion, certainly for guests of the hotel. Luckily, the hallway, stairwell, and front lobby were deserted. No one to ask them questions they didn't want to answer.

Brohm was right. The muggy weather was cloying and uncomfortable. Empty streets welcomed them, but regardless, they did their best to avoid the lamplight. Their surroundings were eerily hushed, even for this hour. Nathan assumed the exclusive neighbourhood made for boring residents, retiring to bed instead of overindulging in drink.

The university grounds were gloomy compared to the streets, with the trees overhead covering any chance of moonlight breaking through. Nathan felt more at ease in the dark, though. They walked up the path carefully, allowing their eyes to adjust, but still found the way ahead murky. What details he could discern were indistinct, but the gravel path was composed of

light stone, standing out against the grass on either side, making it easier to follow.

Brohm stopped suddenly, holding a hand to Nathan's chest. "Someone up ahead," he whispered.

Nathan opened his eyes wide in hope of detecting anything. A shape sat on what he assumed was a stone bench.

"Is that you, boys?" Rabiah called out.

Brohm let out a breath. "You trying to scare us?"

She chuckled as a sickly green glow emitted from a bauble in her hand, not unlike the ornamental trinkets adorning her office. She stood up and beckoned them to join her.

"I would've assumed one so big and strong wouldn't be afraid of anything," she stated in a teasing voice.

Brohm wore a frown. "It's a good shield from getting hurt."

"True words spoken. You surprise me, Brohm," she said, a smile creeping across her face. "But it's not your words that attract me, especially seeing you now."

Brohm scoffed. "Sorry, I don't do ladies." He bumped shoulders with Nathan. "He's my guy."

Rabiah's smile widened, glancing slyly at Nathan. "You're a lucky man. I bet he's a beast in bed—"

"We're not having this conversation," Nathan announced, gesturing for her to lead.

She laughed, guiding them toward the university's deserted entrance. One of the massive doors stood ajar. Once they were through, she closed it and ran a massive bolt into the floor, locking it tight. Their footsteps echoed resonantly against the stone walls, but Rabiah paid it no mind.

"Is this place not guarded?" Nathan asked as they walked the curved concourse.

As though in answer, a man holding a lantern emerged from one of the wings. He wore light leather armour, and a sword hung from a belt. Both Nathan and Brohm stumbled a moment, looking for a place to hide, but Rabiah continued on as though everything was fine. They fell back in line behind her, trying their best to look inconspicuous despite being armed themselves.

"Hello, Robert," Rabiah called out to the guard.

"Hello, Miss Charters. Burning the midnight oil again?" Robert replied, holding the lantern up to peer farther into the dark. "Now, you know how admin feels about guests after hours, Miss Charters."

Rabiah sidled up to the man and brushed her fingers down his stubbled cheek. "Oh, they're just helping me out. No one needs to know, right?"

His eyes flickered between her and the two men looming behind. "No, I suppose not," he said after a long pause. "Just don't make me regret it, okay?"

She kissed his cheek. "You're a doll."

He waved her away with an embarrassed grin and continued his patrol, leaving them behind. Rabiah crooked a finger at Nathan and Brohm to follow. Once they were out of earshot, Brohm shuffled up beside her.

"Was that magick?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "He's just a lonely man, and a woman's touch can always work wonders." She glanced at him. "Well, almost always."

They reached H wing, yet she continued further down the concourse.

"Where are we headed?" Nathan asked.

"J wing. It's mainly used for storage, and the basement is perfect for our needs. No one will disturb us."

"But no one's here," Brohm said.

"Not now. But this could take hours, well into the morning. That's, uh . . . something I forgot to mention. Time doesn't pass the same within fractional dimensions."

"What do you mean?"

"The reasons are complicated. Suffice to say: time beyond the portal runs slower than our realm."

"So you're saying we should be quick about it," Nathan said.

"Yes. As I said, holding the portal open requires concentration. While not overly taxing, it can get tiring after a while."

"How long you reckon you can keep it open?" Brohm asked.

She licked her lips nervously.

"How long have you held one open in the past?" Nathan interjected.

"Uhm . . . maybe fifteen minutes?" she offered sheepishly. "But they were only tests. I could've held it open for much longer."

Nathan huffed. "I don't like this."

She held his shoulder in a familiar manner, as though they were friends. "It'll be fine," she said in an attempt to soothe him. "Just don't travel too far from the portal. If you can't find any crystals, return and we'll try again."

She led them down stone steps and through a maze of corridors until they reached a doorway. Flickering light beckoned. The room was small, easily lit by two stout candles. A few old chairs and a desk had been pushed to one side. On the far wall stood a doorway drawn with thick, white chalk, embellished with glyphs on each side. At the centre of the floor was a chalk circle with the same glyphs written along its edge. An aquamarine rock, glassy in appearance, sat in the middle of the circle. Just outside the circle lay a thick tome, open to a specific page.

Nathan felt apprehensive about the display before him, his stomach in knots. He glanced at Brohm, but his neutral expression yielded no insight into his thoughts. Rabiah handed Brohm a leather bag. Something clanked inside.

"There's a chisel and hammer in there," she said. "You can use the bag to store the collected crystals. It doesn't matter if they break into pieces. I'm going to grind them up."

She sat on the floor in front of the circle, cupping the glassy stone with a

palm, and then glanced up at the two men standing meekly behind her.

"Well, come on. I figure it's obvious where you'll be heading," she said, gesturing at the chalk doorway.

"We're walking through a wall?" Brohm asked.

"It feels like there should be more you need to tell us," Nathan said.

She shook her head. "You're not walking through stone. Once it's open, it'll be like walking through any doorway. Just don't go too far, okay?"

Brohm took the lead and stood beside Rabiah. With great trepidation, Nathan willed himself to stand behind him. He found Brohm's hand, held it firm, and the big man returned it in kind.

Using a finger to find her place on the tome's page, Rabiah recited in a language completely foreign to Nathan. The words were soft, as though made of silk, and her voice took on a low, melodious tone. The cadence began slowly, as though soothing a baby. After each pause, it gained momentum, adding a sense of urgency to the words, until one last chant ended with the exclamation.

A glyph on the wall burst into flame, its corresponding mate on the floor glowing in sympathetic resonance. Another short urgent call, and a second glyph erupted in response. This continued until all the glyphs on the wall burned away to black soot, and the floor glyphs were alight. Within the drawn doorway, the stone wall shimmered and wavered like a desert mirage.

"Prepare yourself," Rabiah said.

Nathan gaped at her. "Prepare for what?"

She scraped the blue stone forward toward the glowing glyphs. The portal burst alive, and a series of images flashed before their eyes. An alien landscape of violet grasslands; a massive sun dawning over barren terrain; an underwater kelp forest; a heaving field of lava. Those were the images Nathan could identify. Much of what he observed was beyond his capability to describe succinctly. The sound of these places accompanied the images, adding to the chaos.

Rabiah shifted the stone with a steady jerk, and the portal stopped its kaleidoscope of visions, pausing on one place. It was a tempest, but made of winds of such violence he'd never imagined possible. There was no doubt to stand within it would tear a person apart.

She shifted the stone back, momentarily returning the jumble of images, before pushing it forward again. Beyond the doorway lay a black void. Deafening screams—millions of tortured souls—chilled him to the bone. A tear welled in his eye. Whether in response to the piercing sound or in morbid wonder of what could cause such a sorrowful wail, he couldn't be sure.

Again, Rabiah shifted the stone to shuffle the dimensional cards before their eyes. She held it a moment longer than before, then jerked it in the opposite direction.

Silence.

Nathan found his ears ringing from the aural violence they'd been

exposed to. The portal revealed a craggy, narrow platform of darkened stone, floating in a sea of glowing orange fog. The light source beyond the fog, whatever it was, seeped from all directions.

"Is this it?" Brohm asked, his voice faltering.

Rabiah glanced up at him. "This is one place chosen from infinity. It's as good as any."

Chapter Eight

Stepping through the portal proved to be an unsettling experience for Nathan. Crossing the threshold brought on a rising buzz, but not one heard aurally, instead somehow deep within his head. The ground, composed of a delicate stony structure, crunched under their boots—not unlike stepping on tiny insect carapaces. Breathing was unpleasant. The air was stale, tasting of bitter metal. His exhaled breath plumed visibly, akin to being the middle of winter. While the air was cool on his face, it wasn't cold enough for that to happen. His eyes burned, as though they were covered with a thin layer of grit. Blinking helped, but didn't alleviate it completely.

After taking a few steps, Nathan adjusted his bow and the strap to his quiver, then turned back to the portal. Rabiah remained kneeling on the floor of the university's basement, her palm resting on the glassy stone, but something about her movements seemed unnatural. With her free hand, she urged him to continue, but the action was so short and abrupt, he would've missed it with a blink of the eye. Her mouth moved—again, rapidly—yet he heard nothing.

Unnerved by the disturbing sight, Nathan turned back to survey their surroundings. Standing on this side of the portal revealed much more. Giant rocky formations, similar to the platform they stood upon, floated above and below them. Brohm, a few steps ahead of him, glanced back.

"This place is weird." His voice sounded equally too close yet far away.

"I don't like it, either. Let's get this done," Nathan said.

The ground squelched and popped under their feet as they trekked down the only path available to them. Soon, the orange fog made it difficult to discern the portal at their back. Nathan noted with mild reassurance their bootprints left a clear mark, so it was unlikely they'd lose their way. The platform widened and diverged into a more natural rock-like formation. As they continued, a precipice emerged from the bright fog. In any other case, the fog should've been shadowed by the sheer cliff, but here, it was as though the fog itself was the light source. The only way ahead was to turn left and follow the cliff face.

A small glint on the wall stood out against the dark rock.

"What's that?" Nathan asked, pointing.

They approached to find an ebony crystalline patch, reminiscent of a tiny head of cabbage.

"That's gotta be it, yuh?" Brohm said.

They knelt down to inspect it. Thin crystals sprouted from a central clump. Brohm pulled the tools free from the leather bag and, using the chisel, tapped one of the stems experimentally. It broke off with little effort, as

though made of glass. Nathan picked up the delicate hex-sided rod, turning it in his fingers, and then placed it in the bag.

"Gonna try breaking it off in one piece," Brohm said. "Hold your hands out to catch it."

Nathan did so, and Brohm placed the chisel at the root of the clump and tapped the hammer a few times. The cluster popped off the wall and fell into Nathan's waiting hands. Not one crystal stem broke off.

"That was easier than expected," Nathan said with a chuckle, placing it in the bag. "But it's tiny. We're going to need a lot more."

Brohm stood, wiping the crumbling rock from his trousers. "Let's find 'em and get outta here."

They followed the cliff face to their right, managing to locate three more clusters. Each were excised adeptly, but as they were settled into the leather bag, they snapped.

"It's a good thing Rabiah doesn't need these intact," Nathan said with a smirk. "That'd be—"

Brohm's startled face—his eyes wide—silenced Nathan. Turning hesitantly to follow Brohm's gaze, back the way they'd come, Nathan caught sight of a slender tentacle rising from the rocky surface. It bobbed up and down a few times before sinking underground. They held their breath a moment, waiting for it to return, but nothing happened.

"What the fuck was that?" Nathan whispered.

Brohm shook his head and carefully pulled his sword free from its scabbard, the chisel and hammer awkwardly held offhand. "I wanna go home."

Nathan weighed the bag in his hand. "We need more," he said. "Just keep going."

Brohm did so, but both cringed at the crunch of his boots. They held still, scrutinizing the terrain. Gritting his teeth, Brohm continued to lead with reluctant and careful steps. Nathan followed close behind, feeling woefully ill-equipped with his bow and dagger. They stuck close to the cliff's edge, and soon came upon another glittering bundle. Nathan watched their surroundings, blindly holding his hands out to catch the crystals while Brohm worked the tools. As soon as it fell into his hands, he slipped it into the bag and stood up. They both surveyed the area for danger, but no tentacle appeared.

"Rabiah said there might be creatures, but they weren't hostile," Nathan whispered in an attempt to quell the fear within himself. It was ineffective.

"Just our luck, these'll be different," Brohm mumbled as he turned to continue along the wall.

Nathan swatted Brohm's backside. "Gods, don't say that."

Ahead, the cliff face to their right extended overhead like a canopy. The pathway narrowed and tilted to the left toward the orange void below. They stopped at the head of this new development, unsure of their safety to proceed. All it would take was one bad slip to fall off the edge. In the

distance, more crystal bundles taunted them to risk it.

Nathan signalled he'd take the lead. The pitted ground was tenuous at best, and with each step, he planted a boot and tested his weight to make sure he wouldn't slip. Brohm—forced to sheath his sword to keep a hand free—followed by example. Their progress, while slow, was consistent.

They reached the first bundle. As before, Nathan kept watch while Brohm tapped it free from the wall. Ten steps farther, they found a number of them concentrated together, and Brohm made short work of each.

"Reckon that's enough?" Brohm asked.

Nathan shrugged, then pointed farther along the narrow and treacherous path. "There's a few more. Better to have too much than not enough."

The face Brohm wore spoke volumes. They both knew they were pushing their luck, but with a shake of his head, Brohm's expression changed to one of firm determination, and gestured for him to lead. Nathan did so, holding a hand to the wall for support.

For their trouble, they discovered another cluster of crystal bundles. Brohm tapped one free while Nathan kept an eye on their retreat back to the portal. Brohm stood up to reach the next one, but instead of hammering, he held still. Nathan, crouched on his haunches, glanced up in confusion. Brohm's eyes, wide as saucers, stared beyond.

"Don't move," he whispered. "There's one right behind you."

Despite the cold, a bead of sweat formed on Nathan's brow. Unable to heed Brohm's warning, he reluctantly turned his head to find a tentacle an arm's length away, rising from the ground. It undulated, then leaned toward Nathan's back, gently prodding him. Nathan shut his eyes and held his breath. The soft scrape of Brohm's sword being pulled from its scabbard announced his intentions.

"Don't move," he repeated in a quiet yet firm manner.

The prodding stopped at Nathan's back, and he risked looking again. The tentacle had pulled away, but its wavering movement became agitated. Tiny tendrils sprouted from its length, extending out in a similarly jittering fashion. It converged upon Nathan again, and that was enough for Brohm to act. With a swipe of his sword, he chopped through the tentacle, and it fell limp. Immediately, more tentacles sprouted from the ground behind him.

"Run!" Brohm bellowed, treading as quickly as he dared back the way they came.

Nathan scrambled at Brohm's heels. Each step on the porous stone proved to be uneven and perilous. Glancing back revealed an untold number of tentacles, and the sight of them caused him to lose his footing, slipping toward the orange abyss. Digging his fingers into the stone, as painful as it was, helped regain control, but the sudden movement triggered a burst of stinging pain in his arm. It shot up past his shoulder and into his chest. Grimacing through the agony, he clambered back to the relative safety of the wall. Brohm managed to reach the canopy's edge unscathed, and turned to find

Nathan farther behind than expected.

"Run!" he cried. "They're nearly on you!"

Nathan didn't need any more encouragement. With adrenaline pumping through his veins, time slowed down, making each step steady and sure. Once within reach of Brohm, the big man turned and ran, sword still in hand.

With the way ahead flat and wide, Nathan determined nothing could stop them now. The grit in his eyes stung—his view watery. The metallic air in his lungs burned. It tasted like blood. He didn't care. All that mattered was to escape this terrible place.

A tentacle erupted ahead of him, its tendrils popping free. Not losing any speed, he deftly evaded it, yet it managed to reach out and snatch him off his feet. He fell prone, and the tendrils extended out to cocoon him tightly. Feeling like a spider's prey, he cried out.

Brohm glanced back and skidded to a stop, causing a shower of stone bits to fly into the air. Using a hand on the ground to gain purchase, he turned and sprinted back.

Additional tentacles sprouted around Nathan, encircling his legs and arms. Another slipped inside the leg of his trousers, clamping around his calf. The burning sensation was immediate, as though it were melting his skin, and he shrieked in agony.

A series of sword swings cut the tentacles down, and the tight cocoon fell limp. With the leather bag still held tight in one hand, Nathan reached out with the other to grab Brohm's hand. The big man hunched over, allowing Nathan to put an arm over his shoulder and limp alongside as quickly as he could.

The damage Brohm had dealt hindered the advance of the tentacles, but neither of them were willing to slow down. Nathan risked walking on his wounded leg. Despite the sting, it was faster than leaning against Brohm.

With sword still in hand, the big man urged Nathan into the lead, allowing him to set the pace. "I'm not leaving you behind again," he hollered.

The portal came into view out of the orange fog, giving Nathan the drive to push through the pain and break out into a sprint. Rabiah was still on her knees, her hand on the stone, watching them approach with anticipation. Brohm yelped in surprise as more tentacles nipped at his heels. He swung his sword ineffectually, falling out of range by the time the tip reached its apex.

The exit came at them abruptly, and Nathan's foot caught on the uneven ground, tripping at the last moment. Brohm slammed into him from behind, propelling them through the portal and onto Rabiah on the other side. Her hand broke the link with the glassy stone, and the portal blinked out of existence—its chalk outline on the wall charred and smoking.

Both of them gasped for breath. The stale air of the dusty cellar tasted sweet compared to what they'd been breathing. A groan emerged from beneath them. Brohm, atop Nathan and Rabiah, struggled to shift himself off the pile.

“Are you okay?” Nathan asked Rabiah as he slipped aside.

She sat up, rubbing the back of her head. “If you boys wanted a threesome, you just needed to ask,” she said with a pained smirk.

Brohm let out a chuckle, rolling onto his back and dropping his sword with a clatter. Nathan, giddy after such a fright, joined in. He held up the leather bag—still in a death grip—like a trophy.

“This better be enough for you. We’re *not* doing that again.”

Rabiah took it and peeked inside, pursing her lips as she appraised the contents. Finally, she gave them a single nod.

“I believe this will do.”

Brohm let out a hoot of joy. “Thanks the gods!”

Nathan laughed again, then winced at the pain from his calf. He pulled up the leg of his trousers to assess the damage.

“You okay?” Brohm asked.

Harsh red burns tracked up his leg where the tentacle had grabbed him. Nathan didn’t dare touch it, as even the material of his trousers caused enough pain. Rabiah lifted one of the candles and inspected the wound.

“How did you manage that?” she asked as though reprimanding a child.

“Giant black worms attacked us,” Brohm said.

She turned to him in awe, Nathan’s wound forgotten. “Giant worms? Fascinating. I’ve not read of any account of such creatures before.”

“Well, they’re not friendly,” he replied, then pointed at Nathan’s leg. “We need a healer.”

“Very well,” she said, rising up and dusting herself off. “Can you walk? There’s a small hospital near the university.”

With Brohm’s help, Nathan managed to stand.

“But it’s the middle of the night,” Brohm said. “Will there be someone there?”

Rabiah scoffed. “You’ve been gone much longer than you think. I imagine the sun’s been up for hours now.”

Nathan blinked in confusion. “What?”

“I told you. Time passes differently beyond the portal.”

According to his perception, only an hour has passed. He couldn’t fathom such a discrepancy.

“Come now,” Rabiah said, leading them out of the dark cellar through the maze of corridors.

* * *

As Rabiah predicted, it was midmorning. With Brohm’s help, Nathan reached the university’s exit with a limp, causing a number of heads to turn. Instead of walking along the gravel lane toward the street, Rabiah led them

across the grassy park to shorten the journey, and they soon reached a large, well-kept building.

"There's a few hospitals in the city," she said as they approached, "but this one is superior. They'll take good care of you."

She turned to leave.

"Wait," Nathan said, "where are you going?"

She gave him a queer look. "I'm not your mother. You don't need me, and I've work to do now that you've supplied me with those crystals. Come see me in two days time, and we'll discuss what needs to be done next." Without waiting for a reply, she hurried back toward the university.

Nathan stumbled into the waiting area, which was nearly vacant. The admission process was swift, and soon they were ushered into an examination room. Despite being small, it felt spacious due to a large window that let in a generous amount of sunlight. The glass was heavily mottled, acting as a diffuser and providing privacy from passersby on the street.

An older man entered, wearing a white linen smock. He sat down opposite them and presented a warm smile.

"Hello, Nathan. My name is Doctor Cadius. What can I do for you today?"

"It's my leg," Nathan said. "It's been, uh, burned." He realized trying to explain the actual cause would result in too many questions.

"I'm sorry to hear that." He glanced at Brohm. "What's your relation to Nathan?"

"My relation?" Brohm stumbled on his words, unsure how to reply.

"Are you family?" the doctor clarified.

"No? I'm just—"

"I'll have to ask you to wait outside, please."

Brohm appeared conflicted. "But, I just . . ."

Cadius smiled again, bringing kindness to his eyes. "I appreciate you're worried about him. Rest assured, he's in good hands."

Nathan patted Brohm's hand. "I'll be fine, big guy."

"Oh, okay." Brohm's cheeks turned rosy, and he shuffled out of the small room.

"May I see the burn?" Cadius asked.

Nathan lifted his trouser leg for him to examine the full extent of the damage. The doctor's eyes widened, then glanced up.

"This isn't any type of burn I've seen before." Cadius pulled a loupe from a pocket to inspect it closer. "How did this happen?"

Nathan uttered a nervous laugh. "It's a long story. I'm with the Adventurer's Guild. We tend to get into trouble."

The doctor uttered a grunt in affirmation, understanding Nathan wasn't about to reveal any pertinent details.

"Let's try an ointment to start," Cadius said, rising from his seat. "I'll be back in a moment."

He left Nathan, closing the door behind him.

Cloistered in the private room, Nathan reflected on what he and Brohm had managed to accomplish, and how close he'd been to failing. The scene of him slipping toward the orange abyss replayed in his mind, only this time, he hadn't managed to stop himself. He fell off the precipice. Stone fragments, disturbed by his flailing, showered over him as he reached out for the edge beyond his grasp. How long would the fall last? Was it endless, or would another rock structure emerge from the fog below and break his fall? He'd either die, or suffer a slow and painful death. He shuddered at the idea of being lost in a place where no one could ever find him.

A knock at the door broke his reverie, and Cadius entered. "Alright. Let's see if this will help," he said, showing a stoppered brown glass bottle in his hand.

Using a patch of cotton cloth, the doctor gingerly applied the ointment to Nathan's leg. At first, it rekindled the sting, but then felt cool, numbing the pain. Nathan nodded for Cadius to continue his treatment, and the doctor proceeded with gentle efficiency, wrapping his leg in gauze once he was finished.

The stoppered bottle—still nearly full of ointment—as well as a few rolls of gauze were placed in a small bag. Cadias handed it to him.

"Apply it once per day until it's used up. If any trouble arises, please come back." The doctor scribbled on a sheet of paper, signed it, and handed it to Nathan. "You can pay at the admission desk."

"Um, before you go," Nathan muttered, "I have another problem, and I'd like your opinion."

Cadius' manner shifted back to one of seriousness. "Of course."

Rolling up his sleeve, Nathan revealed the angry bite marks on his arm. Black veins under his skin radiated out, looking worse than Nathan recalled.

"Goodness." Cadius' tone was dire. "This wound is strange. It's scar tissue, yet it still looks infected."

"It's an old bite from last winter by something called a gobling—"

"You've been bitten by a gobling?" Cadius asked.

"You're . . . familiar with them?"

"Indeed. There are medical journals, articles that speak of a scourge from the west. Is that where you were attacked?"

Nathan nodded anxiously. "I know people died from swarms of those creatures, but some survived. The problem is their bite."

"Yes, it's quite complicated. However, treatment is possible."

"What? So, I'm not . . . gonna die?" Nathan thought he might cry, risking the acceptance of hope building within his core.

Cadius' eyes lit up with kindness again. "Oh, my goodness. No, I'm sorry you thought that."

Nathan laughed in relief. "It's just because of the pain that came back, I just assumed—"

The doctor's sullen face stopped him cold. "The pain returned? Does it feel like a sharp, stabbing pain?"

Nathan tried to swallow, but his mouth was suddenly dry. He nodded sombrely in reply.

Cadius sighed. "I'm so sorry, Nathan. I just assumed, given the amount of time that had passed, that you were just suffering from lingering symptoms. But if the original pain has returned, the reports in the journal say that no one survives. They've tried a number of treatments, but"—he shook his head—"I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do."

Covering his face with a hand, Nathan let out a long sigh of despair before speaking again. "So what'll happen? How does this end for me?"

The doctor's face took on a grave expression, finding it difficult to keep eye contact with Nathan.

"I need to know," Nathan pleaded. "I need the truth."

Cadius nodded. "Right now, you're experiencing the second-to-last stage of the toxin's effects. The pain you experience will take a sudden and drastic turn for the worse. Soon after, you will lose motor function, including the ability to breathe. That will be the ultimate cause of death: asphyxiation."

Nathan had no reason to disbelieve Theodrik when it told him the same information, but now having a second person confirm the grim fact he was going to die in such a manner was devastatingly frightening.

"How long do I have? Months? A year?"

The doctor shook his head. "Weeks. Possibly a month at the most."

Nathan gaped at him, shaking and twisting his arm. "But sometimes I can't even feel the pain. How could I possibly have less than a month to live?"

"I understand your confusion, but as I said, the toxin works strangely. One day, you're fine. The next, the pain is excruciating."

Nathan sat mute, staring into space as he contemplated his life. He wasn't ready to meet its end.

"Take all the time you need," Cadius said softly. "Again, I'm so sorry." He rose from his seat and sombrely left the room, closing the door behind him.

Nathan stood, turning toward the sunlight, and leaned against the blurry window. Dollops of dark and light shifted before him—the forms of people walking by, riding horses, some hauling carts. Each person had their own story—their own joys and woes—but they were ultimately bound to their own fate. He was no different. He just wished he had the freedom to choose another path.

* * *

The heat and humidity was as oppressive as ever, and without a breeze,

the reek of the city was evolving from unpleasant to overwhelming. Thanks to the numbing action of the ointment, Nathan was able to walk on his own, albeit gingerly. That didn't stop Brohm from hovering nearby, ready to catch him if he stumbled.

The weight of despair upon Nathan lightened for the moment, and he smiled inwardly at his luck to have Brohm by his side. Knowing their time together was coming to an end, however, renewed the anguish within him. He considered telling Brohm what the doctor had revealed, but to what end? Once again, Nathan found himself torn between the truth and their happiness. The knowledge that he would abandon Brohm broke his heart. Why sully their short time left together? Nathan cared so deeply for him that the mere thought of hurting him stayed his tongue.

He contemplated had their roles been reversed, would he be angry at Brohm for not revealing such a terrible truth? It was a pointless question. Without a doubt, he would've felt betrayed to not be told, but that didn't change his mind. Even though it was the wrong choice for Nathan to make, he decided Brohm's happiness overruled common sense. He blindly reached out and took the big man's hand. It was sweaty from the heat, but Nathan didn't care.

Brohm frowned with concern. "You okay?"

Nathan looked up at the man he loved and smiled, blinking away a tear. It mixed with the sweat beading on his face, and he doubted Brohm noticed.

"With you? Always."

Brohm gave his crooked smile, and they walked hand in hand back to the Amberley.

Their suite remained a refuge from the heat, and Nathan spent the day convalescing in bed with Brohm. They napped, often waking to cuddle and fall back asleep again. Nathan remained cognizant of every moment in Brohm's arms, never wanting to take it for granted.

As the evening wore on, imposing clouds gathered, and distant thunder rumbled. Both of them were awake at this point, but felt too lazy to consider moving. They just stared at the folds of the red fabric lining the four poster bed and listened to the storm roll in.

The sky darkened. Gusts of wind rattled the doors to the balcony. Fat raindrops spat onto the panes—a few at first, but soon the torrential storm came into force. Lightning flashed, followed by a deafening crack. It was enough for both of them to get up and watch the show.

Through the water-blurred window, they observed passersby scrambling for cover. Brohm chuckled and unlatched the door, and before Nathan could object, he opened it. Rain flew sideways into the room. The big man, wearing only his breeches, stepped onto the balcony, soaking himself immediately. The thin, wet fabric hugged his legs, revealing the bulge of his manhood.

"You comin' out?" Brohm yelled over the din.

Aside from the gauze around his leg, Nathan stood naked before him, and

he gestured the obvious fact with a laugh.

"No one's looking. Come on!" Brohm said, beckoning with a hand.

Nathan tentatively stepped forward, shielding his eyes from the rain, and glanced below to determine if anyone was still on the street. A few stragglers remained, but no one was paying them any mind. Brohm's wet hand grabbed his shoulder and urged him beyond the threshold. Savage, cool winds blew rain in all directions. Nathan shivered and stood against the big man's warm body. Reaching up to cup Brohm's face with both hands, Nathan kissed him deeply.

It was short-lived. Rain sprayed against their faces, causing them to flinch and grimace. Brohm pulled him back into the room with a laugh and latched the door shut. After so many hours of dozing, followed by the cold rain, Nathan found himself completely rejuvenated. He also realized he was ravenous.

"Let's get something to eat," he said.

Brohm gave a toothy grin. "You read my mind."

* * *

Days passed uncounted while Nathan's leg healed. The ointment worked wonders, effectively treating the burns and promoting new skin growth. By the time Nathan could walk normally again, his mind nagged him they should return to Rabiah, but he didn't want their furlough to end. His arm—in pain more often than not—did little to ruin his mood. There was no point in worrying about his inevitable end, and he refused to let it hinder his time with Brohm. The big man didn't appear to care about their mission, either. If he did, he wasn't vocal about it. Perhaps he didn't want their vacation to end as well.

Nathan's musings were interrupted by the sound of marching feet on the cobblestones outside. A powerful voice—orders being called out—echoed across the buildings on the street. Nathan and Brohm exchanged glances and jumped out of bed, opening the glass doors to the balcony. A mass of armoured troops stomped past the hotel, heading down an eastward street, forcing the citizens to move aside.

"What you reckon?" Brohm asked.

Nathan shook his head in reply. "It looks serious."

"For a second, I thought they were coming for us."

"That was our old life," Nathan said, resting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We don't need to worry about that anymore."

Brohm nodded, watching the contingent worm its way along the eastern street. A figure, fighting to pass by, emerged from that direction, rushing toward the hotel.

"Isn't that Cormac?" Brohm asked.

Nathan shielded his eyes from the sun. "Yeah, it is."

He waved a hand, calling out to the old man. At first, Cormac couldn't discern the direction of the voice calling his name, but then glanced up to see them flagging him down. He waved back, gesturing for them to meet him. They signalled their understanding and headed back inside.

"He looked serious, too," Brohm contemplated aloud.

They hastily donned their clothes, headed downstairs, rushed past the front desk, and burst out the front doors, frightening the porter in the process. Cormac stood nearby, out of breath.

"What's going on?" Nathan asked.

Cormac led them down the narrow alley between the Amberley and building next door. It was clear he didn't want anyone on the street to hear what he had to say.

"Iratxos," he said through gritted teeth.

"What? Where?" Brohm asked.

Cormac thumbed back the way he'd come. "Near where I was working in the northeast quarter. I tell you, boys, 'twas nothing like the few you fought at Millsfield. They just kept coming."

Brohm cursed under his breath while Nathan held a hand to his mouth in astonishment.

Cormac continued. "Between the city watch and soldiers on duty, I'm sure they can deal with it. But I saw a number of injured people on my way to find you. 'Tis madness. Where's that daemon?"

"It's hiding north of the city in the mountains," Nathan said. "But we haven't been here *that* long. I just assumed we'd have more time."

"Clearly not," Cormac said. "Have you made any progress? Did you find that woman, Rabiah?"

Nathan nodded. "She's willing to help us. We got some weird crystals. Cormac, you wouldn't believe where we went—"

"He got hurt," Brohm said, pointing to Nathan, "so there was down time while he got better."

"I'm fine," Nathan replied, waving a hand to assuage Cormac's concern, then looked to Brohm. "But this is a wakeup call for us. We gotta get back to Rabiah."

Cormac nodded resolutely. "Very well. You do that, and I'll return to aid anyone who needs it." He turned to leave, but stopped short when Brohm called his name.

The big man took a moment to find the words he was looking for. "I just wanna say I'm sorry for hurting you, not trusting you."

Nathan stood dumbstruck to hear such a statement from Brohm. The monk approached Brohm and took his hand into his.

"You are a protective soul with many secrets, and I intruded upon that. I pushed you in my own way, and you quite literally pushed back, but I'm glad

we've come to understand each other."

Brohm looked down at Cormac's hand, small and delicate compared to his.

"Your apology is accepted," Cormac continued with a smile. "Boys, much is riding on your shoulders now. Be strong, and be careful."

"You too," Brohm replied. "Thanks for coming to tell us."

They watched the monk wind his way back east through the busy street. Despite the fact they had no idea the iratxos would appear so soon after Theodrik's arrival, Nathan couldn't help but feel guilty. They could've been working toward the solution, yet instead spent it relaxing in bed.

"Come on," he said, taking Brohm's arm. "Let's go."

They merged into the stream of people on the street, heading toward the university. Fortunately, the heat and humidity remained absent after the storm so many days ago. Blue skies and a pleasant breeze made the walk comfortable.

"I'm proud of you," Nathan said, nudging Brohm's arm playfully.

"Why?"

"What you said to Cormac. That's not the Brohm I know, but it means a lot to hear."

The big man scratched the back of his head and let out a nervous laugh. "Reckon I owe you a sorry, too. For not believing you."

"We've already talked about this. You were trying to keep us safe. If I can't provide proof when I tell you something, that's my fault, not yours."

Brohm seemed unconvinced, but said nothing in reply. They reached Rabiah's office, finding her door closed as usual, and Brohm gave it a knock.

"What! I'm busy," Rabiah barked, the usual edge of annoyance colouring her voice.

"It's us," Brohm replied.

Not a moment passed before the door was unlocked and opened. Rabiah stood before them, appearing wholly unimpressed. Each word she spoke was measured and emphasized, as though speaking down to a child.

"Where have you *been*?"

Before they could reply, she continued. "I said come back in two days, not . . . how long has it even been?"

Nathan and Brohm bashfully shared sidelong glances. Neither could provide an accurate answer. She waved them in with a scowl. They did so, and Nathan knew enough to slide the bar back to lock the door.

"Did you hear the news?" Brohm asked.

She stared at him, bewildered. "The news? What news?"

"A bunch of iratxos attacked the city. There was military on the streets."

Rabiah fell to joyless laughter. "Gods, what a fucking mess you've brought."

"We didn't mean for this to happen!" Brohm yelled.

Nathan held him back and nudged him back a step. "Please tell me we've

got enough of those crystals."

"Yes, yes. It's been ground to dust. While I still need the book to know the symbols to draw with it, I feel confident we have enough."

"So that's our next obstacle," Nathan said. "Getting the key from Edouard and finding the book without his knowledge."

Rabiah sat at her desk and glared at him. "You seemed quite self-assured that it'd be no problem. Having second thoughts?"

"No," he replied coolly, fighting the urge to prove himself. "I just need you to point him out, preferably outside where he won't notice us. I'll take it from there."

She raised an eyebrow and gave him a sly smile. "And I can't talk you into what we discussed earlier? Getting rid of him for the *greater good*?" It was clear from the intonation her intent was contrary to good intentions.

Nathan scowled at her. "If you want him dead, you're asking the wrong person."

Rabiah's eyes flicked toward Brohm, who stood in the gloom. "How about you? You seemed . . . more agreeable last time."

Brohm stood mute—stone still. Nathan followed suit, staring her down, confident in the fact Brohm would have his back on this.

Rabiah snickered playfully, trying to ease the tension. "You guys are adorable, and I can't fault the loyalty between you two. I'll admit, I'm a bit jealous." She stood and headed for the door. "Follow me, if you will. I'll point out that prick, Edouard, and leave you to it."

She gathered a few belongings, then led them back to the concourse and out the front doors. They approached a bench amid the grass and trees, far enough from the main path to not be noticed, yet close enough to recognize someone's face. Rabiah managed to wiggle her way between them, mock yawning and wrapping an arm around each of them.

"The library closes early, because, of course it does," she said. "He should be leaving soon enough."

Nathan nodded in reply, watching people walk by. The breeze picked up again. The giant fronds made a distinct scraping sound instead of the more typical rustling one would expect. Light and shadow manifested as a hypnotic dance on the grass.

"I was wondering," Nathan said. "Given the name of the university—Oaksgate—I assumed there'd be oaks here. I've not seen this species of tree before."

Rabiah glanced up at the fronds. "I think there was some kind of infestation a long time ago. The diseased oaks were cut down and replaced by these. I'm no expert, so I couldn't tell you what kind they are."

Nathan nodded, and they fell to silence again, watching the exit of the university. After a short while, Rabiah began to tap her foot. It started gradually, without any rhythm, but then gained tempo to an impatient beat.

"Okay, now it's my turn to ask a question," she blurted out. "What's the

deal with you two? It feels like you've got such a story to tell. Like you're wearing a mask."

Nathan scoffed at her word choice. "You're not wrong, but it's private."

"Damn it— Oh, there's our man." She surreptitiously scratched her forehead in an attempt to hide her face and point at the same time. "Blue jerkin, black trousers."

Edouard's royal blue jerkin stood out like a torch amid the crowd. He was all smiles, waving at passersby, who waved happily in return.

"People seem to like him, yuh?" Brohm said. "You sure he's a jerk?"

"He is," she hissed. "Trust me."

"We'll follow him, find out where he lives, and then return to his place late tonight," Nathan said. "Where should we meet you once I have the key?"

"Same as before," she said, pointing at the bench along the path leading to the university entrance.

By this point, Edouard had nearly reached the street, and Nathan didn't want to lose him, despite the ease his vivid jerkin brought.

"Okay. Regardless of what happens, we'll come by so you're not waiting out here all night," Nathan said.

Rabiah twisted her face into a smirk. "I appreciate that."

They left her behind, closing the space between them and Edouard to a reasonable distance. The streets were still busy, so it was safe enough to get close without drawing attention to themselves. Edouard led them north for a time, toward the market district, before ducking down a side street. Nathan rushed forward with Brohm in tow, slowing down to a regular walk once he reached the corner. They caught sight of their quarry heading into a small tavern.

"You want to loiter here or head in for a drink?" Nathan asked with a wink.

Brohm smacked his lips. "Dumb question."

He took the lead and entered the establishment. The tavern made no attempt at elegance. It was dark, dingy, and filthy. A small stage took up the far side of the room, but appeared disused, as though the patrons didn't care what the proprietor had planned for the space. Edouard sat at the empty bar, enjoying the first sip of his drink. A few small groups took up residence at tables. The tavern was quiet now, but Nathan could tell when a place attracted rowdy folk. This was one of them.

Nathan nodded to the barkeep, signalled for two drinks, then nudged Brohm toward a dark nook. They sat at an empty table, sitting side by side to keep an eye on their mark. The old wooden chairs were sticky in places.

"This is my kinda place," Brohm mumbled. "Not trying to impress anyone, y'know? Just somewhere to get nice 'n drunk."

Nathan snickered. "You're welcome to stay. Following our guy home shouldn't be too difficult. I could come get you afterward."

Before Brohm could consider it, two tankards were planted roughly on the

table. The ale sloshed, causing foam to spill over.

"Two coppers apiece," the barkeep said.

Brohm poked into his coinpurse to pay the man, offering a generous tip. The barkeep smiled, revealing a few missing teeth.

"Thankya kindly."

He returned to the bar and resumed a conversation with Edouard. Nathan couldn't catch any words, but judging by their tone and bouts of laughter, it was lighthearted.

The ale was cold and surprisingly good. Definitely not watered down. Brohm grunted his approval.

"Reckon I'll stay for more drinks," he said. "That okay?"

"Sure. Following him will be easier if it's just me, anyway. Your height makes it harder to stay unnoticed."

Brohm wore his crooked smile. "Yuh, I'm no sneaky type, but you already knew that," he said before taking another draught.

A patron entered, recognizing Edouard and giving him a hearty slap on the back. The jostle caused his shirt collar to shift, revealing a leather cord around his neck. Nathan pondered if the key they needed hung off it. The new arrival sat at the bar beside Edouard, joining the conversation.

Brohm shook his head with a smirk. "Dunno what Rabiah was talking about. When she mentioned this Edouard, I reckoned he was some grumpy old guy. That's not what I'm seeing here. Everyone seems to love him."

"I think it's pretty obvious," Nathan said.

Brohm glanced over, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

Nathan took a sip of his drink before continuing. "In our dealings with Rabiah, how would you describe her?"

"Um . . ."

"Think of our first meeting," Nathan said in an attempt to coax an answer.

Brohm chuckled to himself. "Kind of a bitch, I reckon."

"Right," Nathan said. "Irritable and self-absorbed. Remember Lorne said she didn't suffer fools? I think he was just trying to be polite."

"So what's that gotta do with him?" Brohm asked, subtly nodding toward Edouard.

"I think Edouard's absolutely right not to give her access to the books she wants. Even now, I question her motives in helping us."

Brohm sat up in his chair. "Reckon she'll double-cross us somehow?"

"If the situation were different, yeah, I do." Nathan let out a sigh. "But she regards Theodrik with such awe, and it just wants to return home. I can't see her trying to double-cross a daemon. Anyone would be an idiot to try."

"Helmsley took advantage of it to capture you."

"Yeah, and he's dead now. That's my point."

Light dawned on Brohm's face as he drained his tankard. They sat in silence, watching Edouard and his friends chat and share laughs. Nathan was paying closer attention to Edouard's drink, however, and how far back he

tilted the mug when he drank. Either he'd order another or head out soon after.

"You're still scratching your arm."

Brohm's words broke his concentration. Nathan found he was indeed rubbing at his old wound, and silently reprimanded himself.

"It's nothing," he replied flatly.

"You sure?" Brohm asked, a hint of worry straining his voice. "I noticed your arm is looking kinda funny. Like it's getting worse or something, yuh?"

Edouard stood up to a chorus of disappointed groans. "Sorry, guys. I gotta get home," he said. "Until next time."

They bid their farewells, and the librarian walked out. Nathan nudged his nearly full tankard toward Brohm.

"You can finish this. I'll meet you here?"

Judging by Brohm's expression, he wasn't convinced Nathan's arm was fine, but he knew they'd run out of time, so he nodded sombrely. Nathan felt crushed dismissing Brohm's concern, but he couldn't let that stand in his way now. Without drawing attention, he headed toward the door as quickly as he dared.

Outside, he swung his head in both directions, catching the edge of the blue jerkin turning a corner. Edouard continued north along the market street. It was narrower than before, and tall buildings—none standing completely straight—loomed overhead. Another detail that caught Nathan's eye was the excessive number of city watchmen patrolling the streets.

After a short walk, the way opened up to a market square. Countless vendors stood at their stalls, all trumpeting their goods in a deafening cacophony. They offered an impressive variety of fruits and vegetables, breads, spices, and meats. Crowds shuffled for space, and Nathan had to push his way through while keeping an eye on his target.

Edouard completed his purchases and headed for an exit to the east. Nathan continued his dance through the dense throng and managed to keep pace, grateful to keep an eye on his prey. After passing another patrol, Edouard led him into a dense residential area of multi-storey wooden buildings. The streets narrowed the deeper they went, to the point where only foot traffic was possible. Passersby were few, and the fading din of the city was overtaken by Edouard's sharp footfalls on the cobblestone. Nathan held a good distance and stepped as discreetly as he could, but was beginning to feel uncomfortably exposed.

As Edouard rounded a corner, he pulled a key from his pocket. Without a sound, Nathan rushed to the corner and peeked an eye along the edge, catching the librarian unlocking a door and entering. Letting out a sigh of relief, he considered his surroundings. The area was bereft of memorable features, and while he held confidence in retracing his steps back to the market square, returning at night could be a near-impossible task.

He approached Edouard's door. The lock was a simple design and no

match for Nathan's picking skill. He glanced back the way he'd come, noticing a lantern hanging at the intersection. It was the first time he'd noticed one. Stepping that way and looking around the corner revealed another lantern farther down the narrow street. Whether they were the responsibility of the homeowners or someone was employed to light them, he hoped they would be lit this night.

Picking up a stone, he scratched a mark into the wooden building at the intersection. While appearing innocuous to anyone who might notice it, for him, it was an obvious beacon to lead him to his destination.

* * *

While tracking his way back to the market square, Nathan left more inconspicuous guidemarks. He realized the way to Edouard's home wasn't labyrinthine at all, but having the markings to fall back on brought reassurance. The square ahead remained just as busy, so he veered onto a side street to bypass the crowds. A small company of armed troops passed him as he headed south. He could only assume the higher state of readiness within the city was due to the iratxo attack earlier that day.

Even before entering the tavern, it was obvious by the noise many more patrons were enjoying their drink. Nathan found Brohm sitting at the same table, now covered with empty tankards. The mob of thirsty customers had all fallen to rowdy song, with Brohm joining in. Nathan didn't recognize the melody or the lyrics, but before he could catch the song's plot, it ended with a long, warbling, out-of-tune crescendo. The crowd burst to raucous laughter and clapping.

Brohm leaned over to Nathan. "I like this place." His words slurred together.

The tavern was rougher than Nathan preferred, but he kept that to himself. If Brohm was having fun, that was fine by him. Instead of trying to yell a reply, he gave him a smile and a wink. Brohm waved a hand at the barkeep, catching his attention, and signalled for more drink. In little time, a waitress arrived with two more tankards. Brohm paid her along with a tip, and then she began to clear the table.

"No, no," Brohm said. "Keep 'em here. I like to keep count."

"Suit yourself, honey," she said with a shrug, returning to the bar.

Brohm handed Nathan one of the mugs, clanged it, and partook in a healthy draught. Seeing a challenge, Nathan followed suit, much to Brohm's delight. The big man let out a belly laugh, followed by a meaty belch.

"S'cuse me," he mumbled with an embarrassed chuckle.

"I don't think you need to be polite here," Nathan said.

"Suppose so. Reckon I'm just gettin' used to all th' fancy places we've

been."

"Feeling a little out of your element?"

Brohm shrugged. "Reckon so. Never been able to afford places like that. I like 'em, but the folk can be so snobby." He leaned over, nudging his weight against him. "It's fun with you, though."

Nathan wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Anything's more fun with you, too."

Brohm beamed a toothy smile, then pulled him close, accidentally smacking their heads in the process.

"I love you," he drawled.

They laughed and took another draught of their ale.

"We need to get more booze into you," Brohm said.

"Maybe another time," Nathan replied. "I need to stay clearheaded for tonight."

Brohm's eyes widened, giving him a knowing look. "Right. You follow him all sneaky-like?"

"Yeah. Admittedly, I'd prefer to reconnoitre the place, but time is short."

"Reckon if we can't fill ya with ale, I could fill ya with somethin' else," Brohm said with a lewd grin, groping his crotch. "We got time for that, yuh?"

"Well, well, boys," said a voice behind them. "Looks like we got some damn fairies in our midst."

Nathan glanced back to find a group of men at the next table watching them. The troublemaker voicing his hate stood out, however, making no attempt to hide the disgust on his face. Brohm placed his tankard on the table and followed Nathan's gaze, turning sideways in his chair to stare him down.

"What'd you say?"

The man pointed a judging finger. "I heard you. You were talkin' about fuckin' him. You're fuckin' fairies."

One of his friends kicked the man under the table to get him to shut up. Brohm stood and punted his chair out of his way, causing it to clatter against the wall. Anyone not aware of the situation suddenly fell silent—all eyes were on him. Brohm took two heavy steps toward the man and loomed over him.

"Do I look like a gods damned fairy? Where's my wings?" Brohm asked, his drunken slur now absent, as though his temper had sobered him up.

Nervous laughs emerged from the crowd. The accuser—failing to consider Brohm's weight before opening his mouth—looked up regretfully.

"Sorry. My mistake."

Brohm let out a mirthless chuckle. "You weren't mistaken. I *was* talkin' about fuckin' him." He pointed an accusing finger at the man. "Your mistake was calling us *fairies*."

"We don't want any trouble," the barkeep called out. "Nobody in Etton cares who you fuck."

An indistinct murmur of agreement rose from the crowd while Brohm considered the fearful man shrinking in his seat before him. Nathan smiled

inwardly at the thought that while Brohm's anger often caused problems, this time he was enjoying the show. The man appeared unarmed, as did his mates, who were all avoiding eye contact with Brohm.

"This guy *does* seem to care, and it's none of his business—"

"I said I was sorry," the man cried, holding up his hands in an attempt to placate himself. "I was just jokin' around."

"Leave 'im be," one of his friends said. "He's an idiot. Not worth your time."

"And you're chums with this idiot?" Brohm asked.

The friend shrugged in response. Brohm took a breath as he considered the man again.

Nathan stood up and took a few steps toward the door. "Let's get outta here."

Brohm made a fist and held it to the man's face. "Your buddy's right. You're not worth my time. But damn, beatin' the shit outta you would feel real good right now."

The man scrunched up his face and shut his eyes.

"Pathetic," Brohm mumbled before following Nathan out the door.

Evening was upon them as they headed back to the main thoroughfare. A lamplighter passed them by, kindling a nearby lantern on the side street they'd emerged from. Nathan placed hope they were beholden to the backstreets as well.

"Well, that ruined my buzz," Brohm said.

Nathan chuckled. "That was just the right amount of angry."

"You reckon? I really wanted to take him outside and give him a good beat down."

"I have no doubt, but as we know, those fists can kill a man."

Brohm rubbed his knuckles and gave him a knowing smile. "So, what now?"

Nathan glanced at the darkening sky. A few of the brightest stars winked back. "We wait until our librarian has gone to bed. Then break in, get the key."

"You make it sound too easy. You've no idea what the key looks like or where it'll be."

"I saw a leather cord around his neck. I'm hoping the key'll be attached to that. My only concern is whether he wears it to bed."

"If he does, what'll you do?"

Nathan presented a sly grin. "What I always do: improvise."

* * *

The evening passed in an unhurried manner. Nathan and Brohm ate

dinner at a nearby pub, then returned to the Amberley to while the time away, mostly by napping.

Nathan woke with a start. Brohm lay beside him, sleeping peacefully. The glass door to the balcony, left open, allowed a cool breeze to play at the curtains. The hum of the city had fallen silent. It was time.

He gently caressed Brohm's face and pressed his lips to his forehead. "I'm heading out," he whispered. "I'll return once I have the key."

The big man yawned and stretched. "But I wanna come with you."

"This is work better done alone," Nathan said, rising out of bed. "We know you're not exactly stealthy."

Brohm gave his crooked smile. "Yuh, I know that. I meant I'd keep watch outside."

"Sure, if you want to. But fair warning, I saw a lot of city watch and some troops patrolling earlier today. No idea if they'll be out now, but just act casual if we encounter them."

Nathan donned his hooded cloak and strapped on his dagger. He had no plans to use it for its intended purpose, but it was an excellent tool of persuasion. Opening his rucksack, he hauled out clothing to gain access to a hidden pocket. He felt the familiar lump, and dug into a narrow fabric slit to extract a leather tool pouch.

"What's that?" Brohm asked as he belted his scabbard.

Nathan opened the pouch and pulled out the tools. "My set of lockpicks."

Brohm inspected them with a frown. "I've heard people talk about lockpicks, but never seen 'em before. Don't get how you can unlock doors with those."

Nathan smiled, sliding the tools back into the pouch and slipping it into a pocket. "It's a skill like any other. You ready?"

Brohm donned his own cloak—something he rarely wore—and pulled up the hood.

"Yuh, let's do this."

Considering Brohm's stature, had Nathan run into someone resembling him in a dark alley, he would've given them a wide berth. In this case, however, Nathan found him dangerously seductive.

They stole into the night, dodging pools of lamplight and sticking to the side streets. Judging by the moon, it was later than Nathan had planned to leave. He hoped Rabiah wouldn't be too grumpy waiting on them. Ten minutes passed before they crossed paths with someone heading in the opposite direction. The person hunched their shoulders fearfully and stared at the cobblestones as they passed, trying their best to avoid eye contact. Nathan caught Brohm's smirk of enjoyment, and he couldn't deny savouring the power he felt being at his side.

They reached the street near the market square, then headed toward the residential area. To Nathan's relief, the backstreet lamps were lit. The scratchmarks in the wood guided them deeper, soon bringing them to the

intersection where Edouard's home resided.

"This is it," Nathan said, peering down each of the four deserted lanes. "Wait here."

Brohm nodded, leaning back against the wall. Approaching Edouard's door, Nathan pulled the pouch from his pocket and freed the tools. He silently slid the torsion wrench into the lock to apply gentle torque, followed by the pick, and then felt his way into the tumbler. Each pin set easily, and within a few breaths, the wrench turned with a satisfying click. He glanced back at Brohm, giving him a thumbs up before opening the door and slipping inside.

The room was nearly pitch black. Nathan stood still, listening for any source of noise or movement while he waited for his eyes to adapt. A sliver of lamplight from a nearby window gradually became discernible, pushing back the fog of darkness. What were at first indistinguishable shapes became a table with chairs, kitchen counters and cabinets. A stove hunkered in the corner, likely doubling as a source of heat during the winter months.

Scanning the walls, he found coats on hooks. He rummaged in their pockets, as well as checked the hooks in hopes he'd find the key hanging there. No such luck. He stepped forward carefully, each step testing the floorboards for troublesome squeaks. Beyond the common area, a tight staircase led to the second floor. A dim light, possibly an oil lantern set low, beckoned from the landing. Nathan knew if stairs were to squeak, stepping in the centre was the worst thing to do, so he climbed carefully by treading on the outer edges.

As Nathan suspected, an oil lamp sat atop a small table on the landing. He pulled open the table drawer, but it held nothing of value. Three doors, all closed, presented themselves. Perking his ears again, he listened for any movement or sound. There was something, possibly snoring, coming from one door, so he padded toward it. Resting an ear to the door, there was no doubt someone was snoring on the other side.

With a hand on the knob, he turned it gently. Suddenly, the door jerked open with a clunk as the latch bolt freed itself from the strike plate—caused by a misalignment when the door had been hung. Nathan flinched at the noise it caused, and held frozen with the knob still in hand. The rhythmic snoring remained unchanged.

The door opened silently. Dim lamplight behind him painted his shadow —a distorted streak of black—across the room. The bedroom was sparse and small, mostly taken up by a bed and a blanket-covered lump snoring on it. Opposite the door was a window, presenting a bland view of the neighbours' pointed roofs and a slice of star-filled sky skimming the top. A side table holding an unlit lamp sat beside the bed. To the right was a wardrobe, and in the corner to his left sat a chair, clothing tossed carelessly on top.

Hoping for the best, he padded to the chair and felt blindly in the folds of clothing. His heart leaped with excitement. In one trouser pocket, he felt a leather thong. Following it with his fingers, he grasped a cold metal object.

Pulling it free revealed a key emitting a dull blue light—certainly magicked. It was unlike any key he'd seen before. There was no bitting to set the pins, only a narrow metal shaft. Pocketing it, he carefully stepped back and closed the door, but didn't shut it completely. Doing so would only result in unwanted noise.

Back on the street, Nathan found Brohm in the same position. The big man looked at him expectantly.

"Got it," Nathan said.

Brohm smiled from under his hood and hooked an arm around Nathan's shoulder, leading them out of the backstreets.

"That was quick. How'd you find it?"

"Pure luck," Nathan replied with a chuckle.

While it took more time, staying off the main streets allowed them to reach the university without passing a soul. Swirling mist rose from the grounds, making it impossible to perceive anything, and forcing them to rely on the crunchy gravel path to guide them. Ahead, the green glow of Rabiah's bauble, albeit heavily diffused in the haze, acted as a beacon.

"It's about time," Rabiah called out from the fog. "I trust you were successful?"

"Yes, I've got it," Nathan replied, pulling the key from his pocket. Her unsettling smile caused him to stumble.

"Impressive work," she cooed. "Come, follow me."

As before, the door to the main entrance was held ajar, allowing them access. Upon reaching the concourse, she gestured for them to stand back as she spied around the corner. A cursory glance later, she motioned for them to approach and led them down the right corridor, an area they'd yet to explore. Instead of regularly spaced branches leading to separate wings, they found themselves walking the wide and gently curved hallway for long stretches with no doorways at all. Ahead, a tall archway to the right caught their attention, and Rabiah led them through. The ceiling rose out of sight, and the distinct odour of musty books tickled Nathan's nose. Despite the small radius of light Rabiah's bauble produced, he had no doubt this chamber contained many thousands—possibly over a hundred thousand—books.

Rabiah escorted them along the many columns of shelves, then veered down a narrow row. The myriad number of books on either side varied in size and shape, looking decidedly unorganized, however Nathan assumed they must be ordered in some fashion. A metallic glint of vertical green light reflected back at them. After a few more steps, thick metal bars—not unlike a gaol cell—came into view. They rose up, disappearing into the blackness. A gated door with a lock stopped them from gaining access to the bookshelves beyond.

"Give me the key," Rabiah said, her whispering voice tarnished by a mix of impatience and excitement.

Nathan produced the key from his pocket and handed it over, its blue

glow intermingling with her bauble. The smooth shaft of the key slipped into the narrow slit of the lock, and with a solid thud felt in their chests, the gate opened. Pulling the key free and swinging the gate wide, Rabiah rushed to the far end of the room, leaving Nathan and Brohm in the dark.

"Reckon she knows where the book is," Brohm mused aloud.

"Actually, I don't," came Rabiah's echoed voice. "But I know its title, and there's an index that'll lead me to it."

They closed in on her position, finding her rifling through a massive series of cards.

"What's it called?" Brohm asked.

She glanced up at him with a look of annoyance, but upon seeing his expression of genuine curiosity, her face softened. "It's a dead language. I can read it better than I can speak it. Roughly translated, it's called *Methods of Daemon Summoning and Banishment*."

Nathan scoffed. "Straight to the point. A bit on the nose, maybe?"

She continued to thumb through the cards at a rapid pace. "It's a manual, not a storybook."

Nathan perused the tomes on the shelf nearby. The spines, worn with age, told a story of their own. He pondered how many people had handled them. Considering they were held behind a spelled lock, how dangerous were their contents? Did Edouard decide what constituted *dangerous*, or was it just understood these books were not meant to be read by common folk?

One spine called out to him. It appeared no different than the others, but he found his hand drawn to it, pulling it free. The purple cover and backing, illustrated with geometric shapes, yielded no clue what was held within. The thick pages were haphazardly aligned, as the binding had failed ages ago. With a finger, he traced one of the angular shapes on the cover. In its wake, the shape glowed a dim orange. Nathan's bite wound suddenly flared up in pain, and he dropped the book, causing dust plumes to fly as it struck the floor.

"What are you doing?" Rabiah scolded, bolting toward him.

Nathan stammered when he replied. "I don't know. The book—"

"Don't touch anything," she said, picking up the tome and returning it to the shelf. "There's a reason these books are in here. Some are spelled. Opening one without understanding the consequences could be deadly."

Nathan wore a pained smile. "Sorry."

"Just . . . don't do anything. Be like Brohm."

Hearing his name, the big man approached and wrapped an arm across Nathan's shoulder. "I'll keep him still, yuh."

Rabiah rolled her eyes and returned to her index cards. The flipping sound echoed up beyond the bookshelves. Nathan leaned his head against Brohm and closed his eyes. He suddenly felt remarkably tired, and assumed the nap they'd taken earlier was wearing off.

"Found it," Rabiah announced, squinting at the location details written in

small text. “L, 11A, B6.”

She repeated the code a few times before returning the card to the stack, then passed them by to the head of shelf columns. Brohm, holding Nathan’s hand, led him along to follow Rabiah. Nathan frowned, trying to understand the organizational system used by the library. It was then he noticed small plaques with letters at the head of each column, but beyond that—how the rows and individual books were organized—he couldn’t decipher.

Rabiah reached column L and scanned the tiny plaques until she reached her destination far down the row of shelves. She counted a series of books from the left and pulled the sixth one free, a massive leather-bound tome. Opening the front cover, she scanned the title. From Nathan’s vantage point, the ornate cursive text was illegible.

“This is it,” she said. “I can’t believe it’s finally in my hands.”

Nathan had no doubt they were making a grave mistake giving her access to this book, but he couldn’t worry about that now. They needed Theodrik gone, then they’d deal with her.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, leading them to the gated doorway.

They shuffled out of the narrow row of shelves and through the gate, closing it shut. Doing so prompted another deep thud.

“That’s it? You don’t need the key to lock it?” Nathan asked.

Brohm grabbed the metal bar, pushing and tugging on the door. It didn’t budge. Rabiah unwrapped the key’s leather thong from her hand and returned it to Nathan.

“You’ve surprised me tonight, Nathan,” she said. “Men often gloat about their abilities, but rarely follow through.”

“I’m not done yet. I still need to return the key and get out of there without Edouard knowing.”

“Yuh, but that’s easy. You know where it goes,” Brohm said.

Nathan gave Brohm’s belly a gentle slap. “Don’t jinx it.”

The three departed the university without any sign of the guard, and walked in silence down the gravel path toward the city street, escaping the foggy grounds. The entire time, Rabiah had her arms wrapped around the tome, holding it to her chest protectively.

“Shouldn’t you leave that in your office?” Nathan asked.

“No, I’m looking forward to some late-night reading before bed,” she replied with a sly grin. “Come by tomorrow—around noon, I’d say. That should give me enough time to learn the ritual and cross-reference star positions for the right time to proceed.”

Brohm scratched his head. “What do stars have to do with it?”

“It’s complicated, and too late to explain,” she said, walking east down the street. “Goodnight, boys.”

Nathan and Brohm pulled up their hoods and skulked north to the darker side streets. As dead as the city felt before, it resembled a tomb now. It baffled him that they hadn’t run into any city watch, but assumed they’d manage to

unknowingly skirt around them. He hoped their good fortune would continue, yet knew luck remained impartial, and they could easily find themselves on the wrong side.

They reached Edouard's home unseen, and Brohm took up his same position while Nathan snuck in. Once past the threshold and the front door closed, he padded his way across the common area and up the stairs. The oil lamp was still lit, and he contemplated how much more difficult his task would've been without it. Nodding his thanks at the lamp, he edged his way toward Edouard's bedroom door, which was still slightly open where he'd left it. Nathan held still again, listening for snoring, but nothing could be heard. Waiting longer changed nothing.

With gritted teeth, he nudged the door open and stuck his head through the gap. Straining his ears, he could barely register the sound of slow and steady breathing. He nudged the door wider, just enough space to step toward the pile of clothing on the chair in the corner. Retrieving the key from his pocket, he reached for the trousers on the chair but struggled to find the pocket. Lifting the trousers to straighten them out caused a belt to fall to the floor, its metal buckle clanking sharply.

Grimacing, Nathan held still as stone. Edouard's breathing remained steady, and he didn't stir. Nathan let out a faint sigh of relief, and with the trousers in his hands, finally found the pocket. Once the key was returned, he set the trousers back on the chair and then stepped out of the room. With the doorknob in hand, he shut the door and turned the knob to silently set the latch bolt.

"Daddy?"

The voice of a little girl behind him caused him to tense up. Turning slightly, careful to keep his hooded face hidden, he reached for the oil lamp and doused it.

"Go back to bed," he whispered softly in hopes she wouldn't recognize his voice for not being her father.

"Tuck me in?" she asked.

Nathan's mind reeled at a multitude of strategies to escape the situation.

"You're already tucked in. You're just dreaming," he whispered.

There was a moment of silence before she spoke again.

"You're not daddy." There was no fear in her voice, only confusion.

"This is just a dream. Go back to bed, and you'll forget this even happened."

Standing in the gloom, she stuck a thumb in her mouth as she mused over his deception. Without another word, she stumbled in the dark back to her room, and with a small grunt of effort, climbed into bed.

Nathan bounded down the stairs as silently as he could, crossed the common area to the front door, and escaped to the street. Brohm straightened upon seeing Nathan's rushed demeanour.

"Everything okay? Reckon that took longer than it should've."

Nathan fumbled as he pulled his leather pouch free, extracted the tools, and reset the door's lock. Task complete, he rushed toward Brohm, grabbed him by the arm, and led him to the refuge of the dark backstreet.

"That was *too* close," he said in a fit of nervous laughter.

Brohm grinned in reaction. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you everything when we get back to the hotel," he replied, pulling on Brohm's arm again to hurry. "Let's go!"

Chapter Nine

Throbbing pain awakened nathan from his slumber. He rubbed his arm, bringing temporary relief from the soreness, but it did nothing to ease his mind. Denial couldn't last forever, and every time the pain flared up, he pondered if the beginning of the end was upon him.

Judging by the angle of sunlight creeping into their suite, accompanied by the hubbub on the street below, he deemed it to be midmorning. Turning toward Brohm, he found him watching Nathan through half-opened eyes. The big man wore a lazy smile and reached out to pull him over. Nathan slid close, laying his head on Brohm's chest and wrapping an arm across his belly.

"Did you get enough sleep?" he asked.

Brohm grunted in affirmation. "Doesn't mean I wanna get up, though."

Nathan nodded against his chest. He considered taking one more day off from their task, but there was no telling when another iratxo attack would hit the city. They'd already selfishly wasted enough time, and he didn't want to contemplate who would die for his indulgences if they didn't finish what they started. Spending his remaining days with Brohm would be his reward. No obligations, no distractions. However, one concern came to mind.

"When this is all done, we're gonna have to take that book from Rabiah. I don't trust her to keep it," he said.

"Yuh? What you reckon we do?"

Nathan shrugged. "We'll see how things play out, but it has to happen. We didn't go through all this trouble just to have her summon another daemon for her own dubious wants."

A tiny scoff escaped from Brohm's lips. "Reckon she'd be that dumb?"

"No idea, but it's no secret she covets that book. You saw how she practically worshipped Theodrik. She talked about the power daemons have—it's like a drug to her."

Brohm let out another grunt, one of contemplation. "Yuh, I see your point. Dunno how we'll do it without making her angry, though."

"Her happiness isn't our concern. She has that book because we got it for her. It's our responsibility to return it." He stretched up to nuzzle Brohm's neck, giving him a small kiss. "And when this is done, we're taking that extended vacation we talked about."

Brohm returned the show of affection by kissing Nathan's forehead. "Yuh? Where to?"

"I don't care. As long as it's with you, any place will be perfect."

They ate a hasty breakfast and then headed to the university. It was still well before noon, but Nathan's impatience deemed it inconsequential. At least Rabiah couldn't complain they were late. Brohm knocked at her office door,

and after a moment of waiting, the lock slid free and the door opened.

Rabiah stared at them. Her face was unreadable—the excitement from the last night long forgotten. Before Nathan could remark this fact, she ushered them in and closed the door. Books covered her desk again, with the tome they'd retrieved sitting atop them all.

"I'm still working through the details, but . . . we've got a small problem," she said, grimacing.

Brohm let out a rough sigh. "What now?"

"The ritual states we require four warm bodies."

Nathan gawked at her. "What in the hells does *that* mean?"

She shrugged in confusion. "We need four warm bodies?"

"No, I mean, what constitutes a *warm body*? Someone freshly killed?"

Rabiah burst out laughing, covering her mouth with a hand. "No! Gods, I've been reading this book for hours, and the way it's written and translates in my head is . . . not elegant. What I mean is we need four *people* to complete the ritual."

"But, we're only three," Brohm muttered.

She pointed a finger at him. "You understand the problem."

Nathan waved his arms in the air, exasperated. "You said you needed the book for the words and symbols. You didn't say anything about needing a fourth person."

"How was I supposed to know the details?" she responded, matching Nathan's outrage. "That's why I *needed* the book."

Nathan glared at her. "Who could we possibly trust to bring with us? We'd have to fill them in, hope they don't run off screaming for the guard. It's a huge risk, and if we're caught, it'll be a lot of work to explain our reasons."

"You're stating the obvious," Rabiah said.

"You don't know anyone else who loves daemons as much as you?" Nathan asked.

That earned him a dumbfounded expression from Rabiah, as though he'd announced her darkest secret to the world. Her lips trembled as she tried to find the words. "Unfortunately, no," she uttered softly.

"What about Cormac?" Brohm chimed in.

Brohm's solution was so obvious, Nathan was embarrassed to admit it.

"Who?" Rabiah asked.

"A travelling companion who's here in the city. A monk who's helped us in the past," Nathan said.

She scrunched up her nose in disgust. "A monk? Something tells me he won't be interested in helping us."

"Ex-monk," Brohm corrected.

"He's already aware of the situation," Nathan said.

Rabiah's eyes widened in hope. "You think he'll be willing?"

"We'll have to ask him, but I feel confident he'd agree to help."

"Well, what are you doing standing here, then?" she said, waving them

away. “Go get him. There’s just one small section left yet to translate, and I need to consult the star charts for the correct time, but that won’t take but a moment.”

She continued to shoo them toward the exit, and Brohm opened the door to push Nathan out, escaping her incessant waving hands.

Aside from the knowledge of a hostel called The Wheel and Spoke in the northeast quarter—an area neither of them had explored—they had no clue how to find Cormac. Nathan decided they should keep to the main streets, walking south along the familiar avenue. Upon reaching the plaza where the Amberley resided, Brohm pointed to the eastern exit.

“Cormac came from there last time he visited, yuh?”

Nathan nodded, and they headed in that direction. At each major intersection, they wormed their way north and east, passing all manner of shops and townhouses, as well as a few anomalous estates enclosed by tall iron gates and fences. One thing became clear the farther they strayed from the Amberley: the northeast quarter was home to Etton Crossing’s impoverished folk.

Nathan flagged a passerby to catch their attention. “Excuse me. Are you familiar with The Wheel and Spoke?”

The man, who’d clearly heard Nathan’s question, made a point to ignore him as he rushed past. Brohm attempted the same with someone walking in step with them, only to be rebuffed in a similar manner.

“You lookin’ for Wheel n’ Spoke?”

Nathan turned toward the rough voice addressing them. A man sitting on the ground against a brick wall signalled for them to approach. At his feet, a battered tin cup held a few coins.

“You know where it is?” Brohm asked.

“Sure do,” the beggar replied with a snaggletoothed grin. He nudged the cup with his foot. “All I ask is compensation for me time.”

Nathan pulled his coinpurse free, only to find silver and gold coins inside. “I guess it’s your lucky day,” he said, covertly placing a silver coin into the cup.

Wide-eyed, the man plucked it out and studied it a few moments, careful to keep it hidden. “You’s serious?”

Nathan nodded. “We’re looking for a friend at that hostel.”

Palming the top of the cup, the man stood and tucked the silver coin into his dirty trouser pocket. “No doubt I c’n help you find yer friend. Name’s Maddox. Right this way, gentlemen.”

Despite his hunched back, the man was surprisingly spry, almost dancing as he led them. The streets narrowed the deeper they ventured into the northeast quarter, growing in neglect with missing cobblestones in places. Ramshackle buildings hung over them at odd angles, almost threatening to collapse. In contrast with the rest of the city, however, the denizens of the area were warm and neighbourly with each other. Instead of scowls and self-

centred attitudes, they greeted each other with smiles and pleasant hellos. Nathan assumed they knew each other well, as the friendliness didn't extend to himself and Brohm. Instead, they received cautious glares.

They approached a nondescript building. "Our destination," Maddox stated with a grand gesture.

It took a moment before Nathan caught sight of a small painted sign hanging from a hook. The paint was well faded, its words nearly illegible, but he managed to discern *The Wheel and Spoke* when he squinted. Their guide led them inside.

"Ahoy, Maddox," the proprietor said with a smile. "Managed to scrape some coin together for a night's stay?"

Maddox revealed the silver coin from his pocket, and the proprietor looked impressed. "Me fellows here are searchin' for someone," he said before turning to Nathan. "What's the name?"

Nathan waved in greeting. "We're looking for Cormac. He said he was working for you?"

The man beamed a smile. "A gift from the gods, he is. The most selfless man I've ever known. You'll find him upstairs. Room seven."

Nathan nodded his thanks, and then turned to Maddox. "Thanks for your help."

Maddox burst out laughing. "You kiddin' me? Best pay for easy work. Thanks for yer generosity."

Nathan and Brohm left them and headed up the rickety stairs. Each door was numbered with roughly painted white brush strokes. Number seven stood at the end of the hall. Nathan knocked, and after a moment, the door opened slightly. A stranger appeared on the other side, holding his boot against the door as though expecting Brohm to knock it down.

"Yeah?" he muttered nervously.

"Is Cormac here?" Nathan asked.

"Whitter? Is that you?" came an excited and familiar voice from within.

Nathan found it strange to hear his pseudonym spoken again. "Yeah, it's us," he replied to Cormac.

The man at the door, disarmed by the monk's joyful greeting, moved aside to allow them into the room. It was simply decorated with a bed in each corner, separated by wood-thatched partitions. Cormac drew near and gave each of them a hearty handshake.

"'Tis good to see you both," he said. "What brings you here?"

Brohm jerked a thumb toward the hallway. "We need your help. Can we talk in private?"

Cormac glanced back at the man now sitting on his bed, looking mildly concerned and protective of the monk. "'Tis fine," he said to him before gesturing to Nathan and Brohm to head out. Closing the door and taking a few steps away, Cormac spoke in hushed tones.

"Is everything alright?"

"It's about the daemon," Nathan whispered. "We've just discovered we need four people to complete the ritual. You're the only person we can trust to fill the role."

Cormac blanched at the prospect. "What would you have me do?"

Nathan and Brohm sheepishly exchanged glances.

"Actually, that's a good question. We don't know," Nathan replied. "Rabiah's been translating the book with the details. She said we needed four people, and asked us to get you. We'll be able to get more answers if you come with us."

Cormac appeared conflicted, and Nathan laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"We know this is asking a lot," he continued, "but would you be willing to hear us out before making a decision?"

"It just . . . frightens me," Cormac said, offering a weak smile.

"I don't blame you. We don't know what to expect, either, but I find there's comfort in facing the unknown as a group."

It was clear from Cormac's expression he was unconvinced, but nodded for them to head downstairs. Once outside, Nathan and Brohm flanked the monk, escorting him back to the university.

"We appreciate you helping us," Nathan said.

"Of course. The needs of others outweigh my fears. I'm at my best when I'm helping people."

Brohm glanced around at the crowd on the street. "Everyone seems pretty calm given what happened yesterday, yuh?"

"They're a hardy folk. The attack, while short-lived, 'twas horrifying," Cormac said, presenting a fearful glance to Brohm. "You say that returning this daemon to its realm will stop those creatures from appearing?"

The big man shrugged. "That's what Theodrik says."

"I have hope this is true," Cormac said. "Too many innocents died yesterday."

"Did anyone get bitten, yet survive?" Nathan asked apprehensively.

The monk, full of sorrow, shook his head. "Anyone who'd been attacked suffered fatally."

Not wanting to appear insensitive, Nathan didn't voice his thoughts on the matter, but he knew they were lucky to die quickly.

Returning to Rabiah's office once again, Brohm knocked on the door. There was no reply, so Brohm knocked again with more insistence.

"It's open," came Rabiah's reply.

Nathan and Brohm exchanged questioning glances. In all their visits, the door was always locked. With deliberate care, Nathan opened it enough to find Rabiah at her desk. Her expression was bleak.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She beckoned them to enter. They did so, and Brohm closed the door behind them. Glancing furtively at the green pools of light illuminating the

room, Cormac gave the impression the surroundings put him ill-at-ease, and he remained near the door.

"Cormac, this is Rabiah," Nathan said. "Rabiah, I'd like you to meet Cormac."

She glanced at the monk passively, not making any effort to welcome him. Growing weary of her attitude, anger welled within Nathan.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he demanded.

Rabiah's gaze shifted to him, seemingly falling out of her trance. She shook her head in despair. "We can't perform the ritual."

Nathan took a moment to process the simple statement, assuming he misheard. "Why?"

She pointed to a single line of text in the book on her desk. "Sacrifice."

The room fell silent, assuming she'd continue. When she didn't, Nathan slammed the table.

"What does that mean? Give us details!"

Rabiah stood to meet his anger in kind. "The ritual requires a sacrifice—a *willing* sacrifice—to open the gateway!"

"But I thought that's what the crystal and the fancy words were for," Brohm said.

"Yes, they create the portal, but a sacrifice is needed to *open* it."

"How could you miss such an important step until now?" Nathan cried.

She pounded on the tome. "This isn't a recipe to make a cake! There's no ingredient list. It just states it at the end, and even then, it's written matter-of-factly." Using a finger on the page, she found the passage. "It says, 'sacrifice the chosen and willing participant.' That's it. This is the one and only mention that someone needs to die to open the damn portal."

Nathan swiped his hand across his face in frustration. After being so close to completing their endeavour, he couldn't fathom how to leap this hurdle.

"What about using an animal?" he asked.

Rabiah scoffed. "That's hardly a willing participant. Anyway, it goes on to describe what the person needs to do after their death. These are things an animal couldn't do."

"What you mean *after* their death?" Brohm asked. "Like a ghost?"

"Part of the ritual is a temporary soul trap, allowing the person time to open the portal. Afterward, their soul is freed."

"To the heavens?"

The three of them jumped at Cormac's voice. He lingered in the gloom, forgotten.

Rabiah offered a noncommittal shrug. "For one who believes such things, I presume so."

"And if this daemon leaves our realm, how sure are you that these creatures will stop appearing?" Cormac asked.

"What? You want guarantees?" Rabiah laughed mirthlessly. "In perusing another section of this book, it does warn those who try to summon daemons

that small rifts will open, allowing beasts to invade. Knowledge of the iratxo has been written about in many texts, however no one in recent history has witnessed them until now. So with that in mind, we can assume if the daemon is gone, the rifts will close and the attacks will stop. The iratxo will return to the history books until someone else is stupid enough to summon a daemon again."

That last statement gave Nathan a touch of confidence that Rabiah's unbridled interest in daemons would remain purely academic. She understood the gravity and consequences of such an act. Regardless, that knowledge did nothing to help them now. Theodrik would remain a prisoner in their world, and iratxos would continue to plague them.

"What if the daemon killed itself?" Brohm mused.

Rabiah gave him a skeptical look. "Doesn't that defeat the point of opening the portal? Anyway, even if it tried, it would fail."

"What do you mean?" Brohm asked.

"They're immortal beings."

Nathan stood in disbelief. "What if it flew high in the sky and dropped to the ground? Surely that would kill it."

She let out another laugh. "It'd leave a nice crater, but otherwise it'd be fine."

Brohm let out a frustrated groan and slumped to the floor, leaning against an overfilled bookshelf. Nathan, likewise, hopelessly sat down on the chair opposite Rabiah's desk.

"I'll do it." Cormac's voice cracked when he spoke, and he cleared it, standing up straighter before them.

Looking back in confusion, Nathan considered the man. "You'll do . . . what?"

"I'll do it," Cormac repeated. "I'll be your sacrifice."

"You can't be serious," Rabiah said.

Brohm, equally confused and a touch concerned, rose from his seat on the floor.

"I would not jest at such a time," Cormac replied defiantly.

Nathan stood. "You can't just throw your life away. Why would you even consider this?"

Cormac smiled and reached out to Nathan, both hands gripping his shoulders. "Don't see you? 'Tis my final act of redemption. A life for a life."

"What is he talking about?" Rabiah asked.

With a whip of his head and a scowl, Nathan silenced her, then returned his attention to Cormac. "I understand the guilt you feel, but this isn't a solution."

Staring past him, Cormac's eyes glistened. "All this time, I've been trying to help others. But to save the lives of so many by ending the iratxo threat? Whitter, I *must* do this."

Rabiah interrupted again. "What'd he call you?"

“Would you please shut up!” Nathan pleaded to her before looking into Cormac’s eyes again. He tried to think of a way to dissuade the monk, then turned to Brohm for guidance, but the big man only looked on in disbelief. With a sigh, Nathan made another attempt to reason with Cormac.

“Back at the guildhouse, you told us death was the easy way out.” It was a cheap shot—Cormac’s glower confirmed it—but Nathan was desperate to discourage him. “I don’t know much about the gods, but I can’t believe they think a life for a life is acceptable. The death of your friend was an accident. You didn’t mean to do it.”

Tears streamed down Cormac’s face, and he grasped Nathan’s shirt in his fists. “I still have to live with it every single day. ’Tis a pain that never dulls, like a knife stabbing my chest, never-ending. I hide it from the world, but within, I am tormented. Please—Whitter, Sid, Rabiah—I need to do this.”

The monk fell to sobbing, and Nathan took him into his arms to comfort him. Brohm appeared at his side, watching Cormac with doleful eyes, and laid a hand on his shoulder. Rabiah could only silently observe the scene unfold before her.

After a few moments, Cormac managed to compose himself, nodding at Nathan and Brohm in silent thanks for their concern. If there were words that could counter Cormac’s plea, Nathan was at a loss to find them. Asking for confirmation again felt callous. As wrong as it seemed, there was no doubt in Cormac’s mind this was the right course of action.

Nathan turned to Rabiah. “Are you willing to go through with this?”

Doubt crossed her face as she gazed upon the tome before her, then back to Nathan. “I think so, but you’re forgetting an important question: who’s going to be the one to kill him?”

A ball of lead dropped into Nathan’s stomach, and the memory of Tarn flashed before his eyes. The circumstances were different, but he questioned if he could do it again.

“What about Theodrik?” Brohm muttered. “Reckon it should do its part.”

Cormac’s eyes, still wet, creased with worry. “Death at the hands of a daemon? I’d rather die by my own hand.”

“Absolutely not!” Nathan said with decisiveness. “Cormac, I’ll do it. I’ll make sure it’s quick, painless.” Bile threatened to rise up his throat as the words hung in the air.

“So, we’re really gonna do this?” Brohm asked.

Taking a deep breath, Cormac answered with a resolute nod.

“Rabiah, you said portals can only be opened at specific times. When’s the next window we can do this?” Nathan asked.

She freed a book from the pile and flipped through the pages. The three men drew near as she consulted tables of calculations and measurements.

“Tomorrow, just before dawn,” she stated.

“Reckon we can be ready in time?” Brohm asked.

She nodded. “It’ll take most of the night, but yes.”

A nervous chuckle broke out from Cormac's lips. "I will admit, the sooner we can do this, the better. 'Tis easy to lose one's nerve."

* * *

The afternoon passed in a flurry of activity while they prepared for the expedition to the northern bluffs. Lanterns and oil were procured. Flasks of water were collected, along with food that travelled well, though Nathan doubted anyone would consider eating. He certainly had no appetite.

Cormac fetched his belongings at the hostel while Nathan and Brohm returned to the Amberley. After strapping his dagger to his belt, Nathan questioned if he could follow through using it on Cormac. Slicing the carotid artery was a quick solution, but far from painless. An alternative was poison —causing the victim to fall unconscious and ultimately die—but obtaining that required contacts, none of which he had in Etton Crossing.

"We need to get some hard liquor," he blurted out.

Brohm gave him a questioning frown while tightening his sword belt.

"We'll get Cormac passed-out drunk, and then I'll . . . cut his neck." The words felt like sand in his mouth.

Brohm nodded sombrely. "Sure, I'll go get something strong. Reckon we need anything else?"

Nathan shook his head. "I'll meet you outside?"

"Yuh. Shouldn't take me long."

Brohm shouldered his rucksack and took his leave, leaving Nathan alone with his thoughts. Running the plan through his head yet again, he concluded everything was accounted for. He knew the night would drag on, most of it spent waiting for the right time to begin the ritual. That waiting would be torture for everyone, but especially Cormac. Nathan couldn't comprehend how he agreed so readily, but acknowledged the voice in his head stating it was a solution to their grim dilemma. They required a sacrifice, and Cormac fulfilled that need. Nonetheless, a wave of guilt tore through him.

Crossing the room, he caught sight of his reflection in the looking glass. He'd passed it regularly, yet this was the first time he gazed into it. Before him stood the stranger everyone knew as Whitter—and to a lesser extent, Nathan—but the face before him remained unrecognizable. In the past year, his thought process and how he approached each situation had changed. Those shifts in judgement were undoubtedly an improvement from his past deeds, but he contemplated if he was still Nathan—the true Nathan—or had a foreigner taken his place.

Shouldering his pack, he left the stranger behind with a shake of the head. The warm late afternoon sun fought at the anxiety trying to strangle him, and soon Brohm returned with a brown glass bottle in hand.

“Got some whisky,” he said.

Nathan grabbed it, pulled the stopper, and took a swig. The drink burned, and he grimaced as Brohm looked on with knitted brows.

“You gonna be okay?” the big man asked.

Nathan gulped another mouthful before replacing the stopper. “That’s up for debate.”

Brohm hunched down to look at Nathan straight on. “You don’t gotta do this, y’know. I could—”

“No. I’m doing it,” Nathan said with determination, more to himself than Brohm. “This time tomorrow, it’ll all be over. Then it’ll be just you and me.”

With worried eyes, Brohm continued to scrutinize him, and then cupped Nathan’s cheek with a hand. “I’m here for you.”

Nathan nestled his head against Brohm’s hand. “I know. We’ll make it through this. Thanks, big guy.”

Satisfied, Brohm gave him his crooked smile. That simple act was enough to give Nathan the strength he needed. He took the hand against his face and kissed it gently, prompting Brohm to blush and utter a small chuckle.

They turned northward and strolled side by side, oblivious to the bustling street. Reaching the north gate, they caught sight of Cormac leaning against the massive stone wall. He gave them a small nod in greeting as they approached, which they returned. No one felt the need—nor dared—to speak. Rabiah arrived ten minutes later, laden with her own pack. She looked upon them solemnly.

“Well, I guess this is it,” she said with raised eyebrows.

The three men straightened and fell into line behind her, led through the gate to the fiery red bluffs beyond. While they tread the path, long shadows grew from the sun kissing the tips of the western mountain range. Brohm took the lead, finding the way up until they reached the highest bluff they could stand on. Further north, the rock took on a craggy form, making travel difficult if not impossible. It didn’t matter. They were far enough from the city to be invisible, despite the fact they still had a direct line of sight.

Nathan and Brohm busied themselves setting up a makeshift camp, venturing out to gather sticks and kindling. They wouldn’t have enough fuel to produce a large fire, but it would be enough to stave off the nighttime chill. At Nathan’s request, Cormac remained at camp while they worked. He reluctantly agreed, sitting against the northern cliff face and staring out at the vast landscape in meditation.

Rabiah established a workspace at the centre of the flat area. First, she swept away small rocks and debris, and then carefully poured small piles of crushed black crystal on the ground. Using miniature tools akin to rakes and trowels, she drew two large circles, each intersecting the other. Then, while consulting the tome stolen from the library, she rendered the finer details. Intricate designs branched off the edges of the circles. Judging by the imagery on the page, she would be busy well into the night.

With nothing left to do, Nathan and Brohm sat near Cormac, silently observing the view together. A smooth gradient of colour—red, purple, and deep blue—painted the cloudless sky. Some of the brighter stars twinkled into view. The city below—a stout shape against the darkening sky—gained stars of its own in the form of lamplight in windows.

Nathan looked over to Rabiah, and noticed she was squinting at the book. He lit an oil lamp and brought it to her.

"Thanks," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I'm so absorbed in the details, I didn't realize the sun had fallen."

Nathan studied the elaborate motifs and patterns. "Could you tell me how people discovered this kind of magick? It's so complex. It couldn't have been discovered by accident."

Rabiah looked down at her work. "It's ancient knowledge, passed on for untold generations. Nobody knows its origin, but some theorize it was introduced by some otherworldly source." She smiled. "I tend to agree with that idea. No amount of research could produce these results without outside help."

"Are you hungry, thirsty?"

She swallowed and smacked her dry lips. "Now that you ask, yes, water would be nice."

Nathan retrieved a flask from his rucksack and handed it to her. While she took a deep draught, Nathan admired the designs again. The crystal dust sparkled in the lamplight like a rainbow during an afternoon shower. She handed back the flask, but Nathan waved his hand for her to keep it.

"We have others," he said.

"Thanks. Now, leave me to it," she said, shooing him away.

Nathan returned to the two men, finding them deep in conversation while Brohm built a fire. Judging by the discussion, Nathan assumed Brohm had apologized again for his poor treatment of the old monk.

"I appreciate your words," Cormac said, "but as I said before, you are forgiven. Please don't let these worries cloud your mind. 'Tis in the past. Perhaps treat it as a learning experience. Wariness can keep you safe, but it should be tempered with a critical eye. To be distrustful of all those around you is no way to live. Allow them the chance to prove themselves before you judge them harshly."

Unable to meet the monk's gaze, Brohm stared at the rusty earth in deep contemplation of his words. After a moment, he nodded.

"I don't know what we did to deserve you," Nathan said, adding a stick to the fire. "You arrived in our lives when we needed it most."

The monk smiled. "It touches my heart to hear that. Thank you."

"But, I need to ask again . . ." Nathan faltered, not wanting to ruin the tranquil mood of the group, but it was too important not to voice his concern. "Are you *absolutely* sure you want to go through with this?"

Cormac turned himself so he could look more directly at Nathan. "Most

certainly. I've lived a long life, and 'tis a worthwhile way to end it."

There was no doubt in Nathan's mind he did his utmost to dissuade Cormac, but the weight of guilt still sat heavy on his chest. Before he could consider it further, however, the telltale sound of leathery wings announced Theodrik's arrival. Cormac glanced about nervously, catching sight of the daemon high in the sky, circling tightly as it fell toward the group.

"Gods keep us. 'Tis a nightmare made flesh," he whispered, cowering close to Brohm in search of protection.

Knowing the wake of its wings would ruin Rabiah's work, Nathan stood up and signalled for Theodrik to land farther away. Acknowledging his request, the daemon loosened its spiral descent to touch down at the far edge of the bluff, and then advanced on foot.

"Good evening, Nathan," Theodrik said, its voice deep and reverberant.

"Hello. I hope you're ready to leave because everything's in motion. We'll be opening the portal just before sunrise."

It had taken time for Nathan to decipher Theodrik's mannerisms and expressions, to understand its body language. Now, it was clear Theodrik was surprised, and—to a lesser extent—cautiously optimistic about the good news.

"I'd also like you to meet someone," Nathan continued, gesturing for it to follow him to the campfire.

As they approached, Cormac shrank deeper against Brohm's side.

"Don't worry, it's okay," Brohm said to him, but the monk remained unconvinced.

Using the daemon's arrival as an excuse to take a break, Rabiah joined them, strategically positioning herself to stand near Theodrik. She wore an alluring smile, making no attempt to hide her gaze upon its dark skin rippling with taut muscle.

"It's a pleasure to see you again," she said, "but I suppose you already know that about me."

Theodrik stared down at her. "Yes. You are a curious and rare being, Rabiah. You are attracted to me, whereas most recoil at my appearance"—it turned its attention to Cormac—"such as your friend here."

As it had in the past, Theodrik fell to one knee in an attempt to lessen its massive height. It did nothing to ease Cormac's fears.

"Theodrik, I'd like to introduce Cormac," Nathan said. "He's been a good friend to us."

The monk risked a nervous glance over Brohm's shoulder.

"I understand my presence is disturbing for you," Theodrik said, "but if you trust the wariness of your companions, you will find—as they have—I am benevolent."

Cormac took a deep breath. "I mean no disrespect, but 'tis the stories of your kind that bring fear to my heart."

"Yes. I understand that a minority of my kind have sullied our reputation as a whole. As this is not our realm, humans only meet the worst of our kind

—those who would torture and enslave purely for the perverted joy of it. I am not one of those. I was brought here against my will to perform a task. One that shall always bring me shame." Theodrik gestured to Nathan and Brohm. "Actions that nearly claimed the lives of these men."

Cormac, his curiosity piqued, managed to straighten up. "How did you first meet?"

"That story belongs to Nathan."

"Who's that?" Cormac asked.

Nathan and Brohm chuckled, only bringing more confusion to Cormac's face.

"I realize you know me as Whitter, and him as Sid, but that's not our real names. We've been in hiding this whole time. My name is Nathan, he's Brohm."

Rabiah nudged Nathan in the ribs. "You trusted me, but not Cormac? Should I feel honoured?"

"It's not like that. In Millsfield, where we're from, everyone knows us as Whitter and Sid."

"But how does this relate to . . ." Cormac gestured at the daemon.

"The short version? A lord wanted me dead, and with Brohm's help, we managed to evade his every attempt. He was desperate enough to have a daemon summoned and bound by some kind of magick, forcing Theodrik to find and return me."

"But why did this lord demand your death?" Cormac asked. "What manner of deed could've gained such ire?"

Nathan bit his lip. "I assassinated his son."

Cormac gaped at Nathan, then turned to Brohm for confirmation, who nodded matter-of-factly.

"Don't look so surprised, Cormac. I *told* you we had a violent past," Nathan said.

"I knew it!" Rabiah said. "There was something about you two that felt off."

"Well, if we're all opening up, I have a question for you," Nathan said to Rabiah. "That book we stole for you. I get why Edouard didn't want to give it to you."

Rabiah opened her mouth to retort, but Nathan held up a hand to silence her.

"Can we trust you to keep it safe? I don't want a repeat of what we're dealing with right now."

Rabiah stared back, nonplussed. "You really think I'd use it to summon another daemon?"

Theodrik looked to her with a scowl, showing the edges of its sharp teeth.

"Well, would you?" Nathan asked.

"Gods. You think I'm that reckless?"

"Quite frankly, yeah."

Rabiah pursed her lips, a touch of pain daubing her eyes. “No. Never! Just because I’m . . . enthusiastic about daemons doesn’t mean I’d be stupid enough to invoke one. I always knew the risk, more so now.”

Her genuine anger spoke volumes. It wasn’t a smokescreen of deceit. Nathan deemed it one of the few times she spoke with complete honesty.

“I’m sorry,” he replied. “I just had to be sure.”

She turned away from him, glancing up at Theodrik a moment, seemingly embarrassed by her outburst. “I should get back to work.”

Using the lamp as a beacon, she retreated to the black circles, sitting with her back to the rest of the group. Nathan took a breath before speaking again.

“Theodrik, we’ve discovered the ritual is more complicated than we thought. Someone needs to be . . . sacrificed to open the portal.”

The daemon’s eyes grew large, glowing brightly. “I cannot accept this. Who among you would be willing to sacrifice your life on my behalf?”

“I am,” Cormac replied meekly.

Incredulous, Theodrik turned to the monk. “You? I must know the reason you would sacrifice yourself for me.”

“I’ll admit, returning you home is a secondary reason. ’Tis the iratxo attacks that must end. Too many have died, and should you remain, many more will fall.”

A deep rumble accompanied Theodrik’s long sigh. “I am not worthy of you. I am not worthy of your life.”

“’Tis my decision to make,” Cormac said.

The daemon, still unable to accept this, turned to Nathan and Brohm for affirmation.

“Believe me,” Nathan said, “I tried to talk him out of it. He has his reasons, and I respect that.”

Theodrik reached out to delicately touch the monk’s arm. Cormac flinched, but otherwise accepted the gesture of gratitude.

“Thank you,” it said with a deep, purring voice.

Cormac gave a sombre nod in return. “I’ll admit, you’re unlike anything I could’ve imagined. Your words and manner don’t match your appearance.”

Theodrik smiled, trying its best to hide its teeth. “Your words parallel those of your companions. It gladdens me to know my appearance, while startling at first, can be accepted.”

Brohm stifled a yawn, and Nathan found himself yawning sympathetically. Catching Brohm’s eye, Nathan gestured toward their rucksacks as an invitation. The big man nodded and rose to his feet.

“We’ll leave you two. Nathan and me are gonna take a nap.”

For a moment, Cormac appeared unsettled at the prospect of being alone with Theodrik, but then realized he had nothing to fear. They continued their conversation, but soon fell out of earshot as Nathan and Brohm reached their packs. Pulling a few blankets free, Nathan built a makeshift bed on the rocky ground. The night was pleasant enough that Brohm could keep him warm. As

though reading his thoughts, Brohm lay down on his side and beckoned him into his arms to spoon him. Having the big man at his back reminded him of all the cold nights they'd spent together. His warmth seeped into Nathan's body, lulling him to sleep.

* * *

The ocean.

It lapped at Nathan's face as he tread water. Naked, and taking in the warm sunlight, he scanned the horizon from his low vantage point. No land was within sight. The depths—a deep blue—mirrored the clear sky. He had no memory of his arrival here.

Waves broke against the bow of a distant boat behind him. He turned to find Brohm aboard a small ship, its sails taut against the breeze, and Nathan called out his name. The big man caught sight of him and waved with an affectionate smile. Nathan swam toward him but was unable to make any headway. Grabbing the tiller, Brohm tacked the ship, gaining speed and pulling farther away from him. Nathan called out again, but his voice fell on deaf ears. The ship cut cleanly through the waves, becoming a speck on the horizon before long.

A crack of thunder stole Nathan's attention, followed by a deep boom he felt in his chest. Dark clouds materialized, blocking the sunlight. Fat raindrops beat upon his head. The water heaved, intensifying with each wave, then crests formed, crashing down onto him.

He spit out brine and coughed, trying to catch a breath, but the storm was relentless. Each swell grew stronger still, rising to impossible heights, towering over him then smashing down. He struggled to stay afloat, muscles burning from the effort. The winds fought well, however, and won the struggle. His energy spent, he allowed the water to take him.

Sinking into the dark as the waves battled above, he held his breath, but the burn in his lungs quickly demanded air. In a final act of submission, he opened his mouth and, with apprehension, inhaled water. The sharp taste of salt was unbearable, but otherwise he found the experience intriguing. He drew in another tentative breath and closed his eyes.

A jagged sensation woke him from his dream.

The bite on his arm was ablaze with agonizing pain. Gasping in shock, Nathan wriggled free from Brohm's hold as delicately as possible, not waiting to wake him. He stumbled away from the others, using the ragged cliff face to break their line of sight.

An anguished grunt escaped him. No amount of rubbing soothed the pain. This was nothing like the previous attacks he'd suffered. Acidic fire burned from within, travelling up his arm to his chest, his legs, his head. He clamped

a hand over his mouth to stifle another excruciating cry. Through the pain, he wondered if it would subside, or if this would be the end of him.

He collapsed, forced into a foetal position. The rocky ground tore into his face—the sensation a mere prickle in comparison. Each breath was a rigorous struggle. Fear took hold and he tried to scream, but found his voice frozen. He pushed harder, only to utter gurgling rasps.

Then, as though a miracle, serrated edges of the pain began to dull—a wave of agony followed by a reprieve. With each surge, the pain dissipated until it finally vanished. Stones dug into his side, but he didn't dare risk moving a muscle.

He waited in apprehensive stillness.

After a few minutes, he gambled to take a deep breath. The cool air soothed his lungs, and he rolled onto his back. A blurry kaleidoscope of stars swam in his vision. A flood of emotion—fear and relief—overtook him, and he fell to quaking, muted sobs. He knew what needed to be done. The denial within him had been strong, but the dread of waiting for the inevitable end to come was stronger still.

He stood up gingerly. The ordeal left his muscles aching, but he soon found the strength he sought. He passed by Brohm, thankful to find him still asleep. Cormac, Rabiah, and Theodrik sat around the dying fire, talking in hushed tones. Judging by Cormac's demeanour, he'd warmed up the daemon much quicker than Nathan would've expected.

"Couldn't sleep?" Rabiah asked.

Their expression shifted to concern as Nathan fell within the small sphere of light.

"Your face is cut. Is everything alright?" Cormac asked.

Nathan stood before them, shaking his head. "Cormac, I'm taking your place."

The monk stared back in confusion.

"I'm going to be the sacrifice," Nathan said.

Cormac rose to his feet in a flash. "Absolutely not! Why would you suggest such a thing?"

"There's something—"

"You have so much life ahead of you. You and Sid—I mean, Brohm."

Nathan waited until he was sure Cormac had finished. "There's a reason I need to do this. Theodrik is the only one who knows the truth." He glanced at the daemon. "I asked to keep it secret. Thank you for respecting that."

Theodrik offered a solemn nod in reply.

"What truth?" Rabiah asked.

Pulling up his sleeve, Nathan revealed the bite on his arm. She winced at the sight in response. The black veins emerging from the angry scars now reached farther than before, snaking up and down the length of his arm. This surprised even Nathan. The attack he endured must've caused it.

"My body didn't properly neutralize the toxin from the iratxo bite.

Theodrik told me my fate, and I had a doctor confirm it. I'll be dead soon enough."

Cormac's brows furrowed from the unspoken conflicts within, but Nathan continued before he could voice them.

"I know you were ready to sacrifice yourself, Cormac. But I'm begging you to allow me to take your place. Succumbing to the toxin is a terrifying way to die."

"Does Brohm know you're doing this?" Rabiah asked.

Nathan shook his head. "I debated telling him so many times. He deserves to know, but I selfishly wanted to keep everything as it was." He turned his attention back to Cormac. "Please, will you let me take your place?"

The monk stared at his feet. "What choice do I have?"

Those words walloped Nathan in the gut. "Please look at it from another angle. My death will open the portal, allowing Theodrik to leave and end the iratxo attacks. You'll still be alive to continue your work to help those in need." He hesitated a moment, then let out a sigh. "I realize you felt this sacrifice would be your final act toward redemption. That, I can't fix for you."

Cormac finally looked into Nathan's eyes. "No, you cannot. But if you say your life is forfeit, 'twould be a waste to end mine prematurely. Very well."

Nathan hugged Cormac tightly. "Thank you," he whispered.

"I don't want to ruin this tender moment," Rabiah said, "but who's going to do the deed? Kill you, I mean."

Nathan released Cormac and looked to Theodrik. "I was hoping you could."

It stared back in surprise. "Do you have a preferred method?"

"Something quick. Maybe break my neck?" Nathan said with a grimace.

"This conversation's so fucking weird," Rabiah mumbled.

That statement brought the discussion to a standstill while the four of them processed it. She wasn't wrong. It was absurd beyond belief.

"Very well," Theodrik replied after the moment of silence.

Nathan, now unable to make eye contact, busied himself by adding a few dry sticks to the hot coals. They caught fire, a flash of light illuminating the sombre faces surrounding it.

"I guess there's one last thing worth mentioning," Nathan said. "My appearance—my face—is a lie."

Rabiah shook her head. "What in the name of the gods are you talking about?"

"Brohm and I not only hid our names, but our appearance as well. We were told not to speak of it, otherwise the illusion would break."

She examined his face. "Okay. You've spoken it, but nothing's changed."

The witch, Morgana, had never been clear how the spell worked, but her warning not to speak of it made it sound fragile. Nathan tried to remember the words Morgana spoke when she purposely broke the spell cast upon her. She

immediately transformed from a young to old woman before his eyes.

"It's magick," Nathan said. "Magick was used to hide my true appearance."

Rabiah and Cormac's eyes grew large.

"So, 'tis the real you I see now?" Cormac asked.

"Yeah."

"I gotta say, it's an improvement," Rabiah said.

Nathan scoffed. "Thanks, I guess."

"But why share this now?" she asked.

"The spell breaks upon death, so I'd look like a stranger to you. I didn't want Brohm have to explain it and risk breaking the illusion on himself. He still needs it." He turned to Cormac. "Please keep this to yourself, okay? Don't mention it to Brohm, or anyone."

"But he'll see you've changed," Cormac said.

"It's complicated, but we already see each other's true face."

The group fell to silence again, and Nathan used that opportunity to leave them and retire to his makeshift bed.

To return to Brohm.

The time had come. Nathan had put it off as long as he could. The regret was overbearing, and he hadn't even told him yet.

Brohm was still sound asleep. Fumbling in the dim starlight, Nathan found the second oil lamp and lit it. The big man always looked so peaceful when he slept. All emotions washed clean from his face, replaced by a subtle contentment. Nathan hated to disturb such calm, but Brohm deserved the truth. He knelt and caressed the big man's cheek. Brohm stirred at the touch, his eyes squinting against the glare of the lamp.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Nathan tried to speak, but instead choked at the anguish in his throat. He refused to cry. At least, not yet.

Brohm sat up. "What's wrong?" he repeated, concern straining his voice.

"There's something I need to tell you. Something I've kept secret from you, from everyone."

Brows creased, Brohm leaned closer to him. "What is it?"

Nathan pulled up his sleeve to reveal his arm. "I know you've been asking about me scratching. We've spent enough time naked that I'm sure you've seen this get worse."

Brohm nodded, only glancing at the bite marks before returning his gaze to Nathan's eyes. "Yuh, I was worried, but reckoned you'd tell me if it was bad enough."

"It's bad." Nathan pulled his sleeve down. Looking at it made him nauseous. "It's going to kill me."

Incredulous, Brohm's face twitched to a frown. "It might be itchy, but it's not gonna kill you."

"The toxin's still in my blood, biding its time. It's not just itchy, it's

painful. I've been able to hide it from you, but it's getting worse. Theodrik said it'll get to a point that I won't be able to breathe."

"Wait. That thing knew, and I didn't? And how's it know it's gonna kill you? Can we even trust it?" Brohm's questions came fast and strong, a spur of anger scratching in his voice.

"I asked that doctor about it, too. He said the same thing."

"And you didn't tell *me*?"

Nathan reached out to take his hand, but Brohm dodged it with the clear expression he demanded an answer.

"Believe me, I wanted to," Nathan said, his voice cracking. "But I didn't want you to worry. I just wanted everything to be the same between us."

"Bullshit! Nothing would've changed."

"You know that's not true. You would've worried about me."

With crossed arms, Brohm stared into the dark to avert his gaze.

"Think of the fun days we had at the hotel," Nathan continued. "Had you known, they would've been ruined."

The big man huffed in reply. Nathan closed the space between them, resting his head against Brohm's shoulder.

"You've got every reason to be mad. Right from the start, I knew keeping it secret was a mistake, but I couldn't bring myself to tell you."

Brohm finally spoke again. "There's gotta be something we can do. Some kind of cure. Something magick?"

Still leaning against his shoulder, Nathan shook his head. "Right now, there's no cure. Even if one were discovered, I'm out of time."

"What'd you mean?"

Nathan pulled back to look him in the eye. "I'll be dead in weeks."

"How? You're sitting in front of me? You're fine. How can you be fine and then dead?" Brohm's anger—the armour holding back his tears—was breaking.

"I told you, I've been hiding it. I'm *not* okay, and I'm terrified."

Brohm pulled him into his arms with a crushing hug. Nathan returned it, resting his head against his shoulder again, savouring his warmth, his touch, his scent. He held the moment, imprinting it in his mind. He wished his life could end like this, but that would be too easy.

"I'm taking Cormac's place as the sacrifice."

Brohm stiffened.

"I'm dead already. Doing it this way will be quick. I won't suffer."

"But"—Brohm broke the embrace and looked upon Nathan with an expression of betrayal—"you said after tonight, it'd be just us, together. Was that a lie?"

"No! No, no, no . . ." Nathan kissed his cheek, wetting Brohm's face with his tears. "I wanted that more than anything. I wanted to spend every second we had left together. Gods! I want that more than anything."

He pulled back to find tears streaming down Brohm's face, blending with

his own.

"When I told you that, I thought we still had time," Nathan said. "But I just had another attack. I've never felt anything like it. I thought I was dead then and there. Knowing it's only gonna get worse? I'm so scared, Brohm."

The big man, eyes filled with tears, tugged him close again. A cascade of guilt overwhelmed Nathan. Guilt for holding back the truth, and now guilt for abandoning Brohm and the heartache he would endure from their separation. Nathan had experienced that before with Graham—the only other person he loved—but what he and Brohm had was worlds different. The sorrow would be that much more devastating, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Time passed until they could cry no more. The tears helped relieve the raw emotion, allowing a sense of acceptance to wash over them, but tears were a meagre salve to mend the loss Brohm would suffer in the days to come. They lay together, face to face. Words—a pale medium to convey their thoughts—were left unspoken. All they yearned for now was to be held in each other's arms.

* * *

For Nathan, it was always darkest before the dawn. During those nebulous hours, ruminations and worries—tiny and insignificant—always compounded in his mind. He admitted that tonight, the bleak thoughts roiling in his head were warranted. Despite this, a wave of relief kept washing over him. Upon learning his fate, the prospect of succumbing to the toxin's effects weighed heavy on him, yet now, knowing his death would be quick and relatively painless brought a strange modicum of comfort.

The night stretched on forever. If he'd dosed off, he had no recollection of it. Brohm had fallen asleep sporadically, but stirred back to consciousness moments later. Neither of them dared to speak. Words would change nothing now, and could only serve to disrupt the solemn calm between them.

The night sky commenced its languid shift from black to deep blue, heralding the start of a new day. Nathan's final dawn. The sound of crunching gravel bore down on them. Nathan, lying on his side with a view of the cliffs, was unsure who it was. It didn't matter. He knew their time together was over. Brohm turned his head to meet their visitor's gaze.

"Brohm, Nathan. 'Tis time," Cormac said, nearly a whisper.

Nathan turned onto his back. "Thanks. We'll be there soon."

Cormac nodded and returned to the others. Staring at the sky, Nathan watched the stars gradually fade away, and then shook his head in resignation.

"I guess this is it."

Brohm laid a hand on Nathan's chest in reply, its warmth radiating through his jerkin.

Nathan continued. “I’m sorry it took this long to tell you the truth.”

The big man rubbed his chest in consolation. “S’okay. I get it. Reckon I wouldn’t’ve, either.”

“But more important, I’m sorry I’m leaving you.”

“Don’t say it like that. This wasn’t your choice.”

“I know,” Nathan said, turning to Brohm. “But I’m still leaving you. I was looking forward growing old with you.”

Brohm’s lip quivered as though the idea had crossed his mind in the past. “You reckon we’d last that long?”

“It would’ve been fun to try, right? With you at my side, I always felt like I could take on the world.”

A tear welled up in Brohm’s eye, threatening to fall. “Gods, I’m gonna miss you.”

He grabbed Nathan’s jerkin and pulled him close for a kiss. It was slow and deliberate. Full of passion.

“I love you,” Brohm whispered in his ear. “I’ll always love you.”

Nathan held him tight. “I love you, too, big guy.”

The embrace lasted for as long as they dared. It felt right to end it by their own volition, and they didn’t want to be interrupted by another visitor. After wiping their tears, they finally rose to their feet. Rabiah, Cormac, and Theodrik stood near the ritual site, respectfully turned away to grant them what little privacy they had left. Upon hearing their approach, the trio turned to face them.

“You ready?” Rabiah asked with the tome in hand.

Nathan offered a hesitant smile. “I don’t think anyone can be ready for this, but yeah.”

“So, how’s this work?” Brohm asked.

She opened the book, pulling on a cloth bookmark to unfurl the pages to the correct spot. “It’s quite simple, really. We stand within the larger circle. I’ll speak the words, you three repeat them. It’s in the same language I spoke while opening the portal to the fractional dimension, so you’ll need to speak it phonetically.”

“I don’t get it,” Brohm said nervously.

“Just repeat the sounds she makes,” Nathan said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll speak slowly,” Rabiah said. “But it needs to match exactly what I say, okay? You’ll do fine.”

Brohm nodded in understanding, but his creased brows said otherwise. She beckoned them to enter the circle with her. Theodrik, meanwhile, backpedalled to give them room.

“’Tis needed to hold hands?” Cormac asked.

Rabiah, using a finger to find the first stanza, distractedly shook her head. She then proceeded without warning, speaking the first few words. The three men repeated, albeit with a stumble, but Nathan assumed it was fine because she continued with the next line.

After a dozen set of words, they'd fallen into a rhythm. The silken language had a beautiful simplicity to it—none of the words difficult to pronounce. As they continued, tiny rivulets of smoke rose from the black crystal dust at their feet. Nathan hoped that was normal, and glanced to Rabiah for confirmation, but her eyes were locked on the page. He questioned if she even noticed. Before he could wonder further, the edge of one circle burst into flame. It travelled along the length like a cord fuse, spreading out to the intricate web of designs Rabiah had laboured over during the course of the night. The second circle intersecting the first ignited as well. In the wake of the small flames, the crystal melted and solidified—akin to black glass—holding the shape of the motifs in perfect detail.

"Good," Rabiah said. "Now, careful not to touch the crystal. It's extremely delicate, and if broken, will cause the ritual to fail. Also, stand closer to me, away from the second circle."

"Why?" Brohm asked.

She gave him a disquieting look. "Just in case."

"Just in case *what*?"

She ignored him, instead continuing the second stanza, ending any chance to ask more questions. This time, while the words still held their soft pronunciation, they were more complex with a greater number of syllables. Rabiah made a point to slow down for significantly long words so they could repeat them clearly.

The ground shuddered. Subtly at first, almost imperceivable, but with each line spoken, the rock under their feet replied in kind with more force. Rabiah faltered a moment, watching the second circle with uncertainty. Nobody dared to voice their concern or shift from their spot. She continued to read from the tome, raising her voice to be heard over the rumbling. Below them came a deep, violent cracking sound like a massive tree felled in a forest. Undeterred, she spoke the next line, bolstering their resolve to continue. At this point, she was nearly yelling, and they responded in kind.

Upon reciting the final sentence, the ground at the centre of the second circle shattered. Splinters of rock flew in all directions, and a thin line of fire shot out from a fissure, launching into the sky past the clouds before retracting back and holding steady. Aside from the burning pillar, which loomed taller than Theodrik, all fell silent.

The daemon exclaimed a word in its native tongue. If Nathan could guess at its meaning, he assumed: *wow*!

"You can say that again," Brohm said with a nervous chuckle.

"What is that?" Cormac asked.

"That's the portal," Rabiah said. "But as you can see, it's closed. It can only be opened by the touch of a soul, a spirit, a ghost—whatever you want to call it."

All eyes fell to Nathan.

"There's one more stanza, though," Rabiah continued. "Compared to the

others, it's short. It'll create a barrier to trap the soul within the circles. And, uh, it shouldn't cause any more earthquakes . . . I hope."

Nathan appreciated her attempt at levity, but did nothing to lessen the fact he would be dead soon. He swallowed back bile again at that realization. No amount of time to prepare for the inevitable could make it any easier for him. He motioned for her to begin.

Raising the book, Rabiah spoke the final set of phrases. The smooth, silky articulations from before had returned, mostly single syllables. The familiarity allowed the three men to enunciate them with ease. Soon, a hissing surrounded them, accompanying the fiery pillar before them. The black glass encircling them bloomed from within—an ethereal blue Nathan had seen once before. The ghosts of Tornel Keep glowed the same hue.

Lost in that memory, he unwittingly repeated after Rabiah. The words, once awkward in his mouth, felt natural now. The three men spoke the final sentence, and the blue haze rose up, surrounding them in a bubble. The translucent walls shimmered like a rainbow, akin to mixing oil and water.

"You all did well," Rabiah said, closing the tome. "Better than expected, to be honest."

"What happens now?" Cormac asked.

"Brohm, Cormac, you step outside the field. Again, watch your step. If the crystal is broken, everything will be ruined. Nathan"—she couldn't meet his gaze—"you stay here."

Rabiah and Cormac stepped through the wall of the bubble. It shimmered in response. Brohm, instead of following them, turned his attention to Nathan.

"Reckon this is it."

Nathan sighed, and took Brohm's hands into his. He was at a loss for words again. Nothing could convey the emptiness he felt. Fate had made its decision, and he had to abide by it.

They'd said their goodbyes already, but Nathan couldn't release his hold on Brohm without one more embrace. He hugged him, and Brohm returned it with equal fervour. The moment passed fleetingly, but nothing could be done about it. Breaking his hold, Nathan nudged Brohm to leave the circle.

"Theodrik, it's your time to . . ." Rabiah hesitated, and then wore a cheerless smile. "It's time to play your part."

Approaching the translucent bubble, Theodrik was large enough to stand outside and reach in. Its massive hands wrapped around Nathan's neck with ease. The hold was gentle, yet Nathan instinctively gripped the meaty fingers in an attempt to retain some level of control—a futile attempt considering its strength.

"Thank you, Nathan," it said. "Your sacrifice will never be forgotten."

"Will it hurt?"

"I will be quick. Any pain you feel will be ephemeral."

Nathan turned his head slightly, looking back at the three observers. Rabiah met his gaze with grim acceptance. Cormac, his head bowed, silently

mouthed a prayer. Brohm, eyes brimming with tears, gave him his crooked smile, albeit one Nathan had never seen before. It spoke of pride and love, sadness and fear. It was a smile that said, from this point forward, nothing would ever be the same for Brohm again.

Nathan did his best to return the smile. One that said: *be brave*.

"Are you ready?" Theodrik asked.

Nathan swallowed and closed his eyes. "Yes."

There was no hesitation. The grip tightened and forced his neck to an impossible position. He felt a pinch, followed by a terrible crunch.

And then, nothing.

* * *

Confused, Nathan opened his eyes. Theodrik stood before him, still holding him up by the neck, but the pressure Nathan felt before was missing. The daemon shifted its stance, then placed something on the ground at its feet outside the circle.

Nathan glanced down and witnessed himself. A limp body. Dead.

He immediately looked away. Gazing upon his corpse brought on a kind of dread he'd never experienced before. Instead, he focused on Brohm. The big man was on his knees—trembling, sobbing. Cormac knelt at his side, trying to console him. Rabiah stared back at Nathan with wide eyes, absolutely rapt by what she saw.

She said something.

It was then Nathan realized he could hear nothing. Somehow, it was beyond silence. Physical sensation was missing as well. He gawked at his hands, translucent blue. He could rub them together, yet the sensation associated with the action was absent. Looking past his hands, he realized he was naked. Despite the inappropriateness of the situation, this brought on a moment of levity. He laughed, or at least he tried to. He couldn't feel his body shake from the act, nor did he emit a sound.

Looking back at Brohm, Cormac, Rabiah, and Theodrik, he realized they all emanated a soft blue glow. Its source lay just beneath their skin, in perfect sync with their movements. Nathan could only speculate on what he perceived as their own soul, their own spirit.

Brohm rose to his feet and stood before the translucent bubble. The anguish written on his face was too much for Nathan to bear, and he reached out to touch him, but the barrier stopped his hand from crossing over. Seeing this, Brohm ran his hand through the bubble unhindered. Paradoxically, the spirit within Brohm could breach through as well. Perhaps Brohm's body acted as a bridge to allow it access through the barrier.

His hand reached for Nathan's face. He hesitated a moment before touching him, then immediately pulled back. The touch caused him pain, and he exclaimed something in reaction. Nathan pointed at his ear and shook his head to indicate he couldn't hear. Brohm gestured to tell him it didn't matter, and then spoke again—deliberately this time—allowing Nathan to read his lips.

I love you.

Holding a hand to his chest, Nathan mouthed the same words back to him. Brohm offered a mournful smile and roughly wiped his tears away with his sleeve.

Rabiah waved to catch Nathan's attention, then pointed behind him. He turned, only to realize he was floating slightly off the ground. To move only required a thought. As bizarre as it seemed, it felt completely natural.

Before him stood the fiery pillar. In the shock of his metamorphosis, he'd completely forgotten about it, along with his whole purpose for being there. He hovered toward it with caution, but found no heat radiating from its centre.

Holding out a hand toward it, he glanced back to Rabiah for confirmation. She nodded her head.

Nathan thrust his hand into the fire. The pillar reacted by intensifying, its flames angry at the intrusion. He held his hand there, enjoying the curious lack of sensation. The fire grew to a flat oval, extending the entire height of the pillar before ripping open at its centre, revealing an alien world.

Beyond stood a forest of exotic trees and hanging vines. Instead of green leaves and brown bark, the foliage ran the gamut of colours, from fiery yellows to deep violet hues. Beyond the treeline, a field of tall blue grasses. Further out, the scene fascinated Nathan even more so. Countless islands, seemingly floating in space, dotted a blood-red sky. Each held an incredible bounty of trees and vegetation. Water, its origin unknown, fell off the edge of other islands. The farther the water dropped, the more it spread out before turning to mist. Three moons—all much larger than Nathan had ever seen—proudly stood guard over the isles.

Nathan turned to witness his companion's reaction. Brohm, Cormac, and Rabiah all stared on in wonder while speaking to each other with excitement. Theodrik stood to one side. Its smile, as usual, was a frightful mess of teeth, but Nathan could easily see past that now. It was a smile of joy—happiness that it could finally return home. Spotting Nathan's gaze, it stepped closer, dropped to one knee, and bestowed a gracious bow of the head. Nathan, a smile on his face, nodded in return.

Theodrik rose and turned back to the group, offering its farewell. They returned it in kind with waves of goodbye. Careful not to disturb the intricate crystal designs with its clawed feet, Theodrik stepped through the portal. After reaching past the treeline, it ran with a heavy gait, catching the wind with its powerful wings, and lifted off the ground. It glided majestically through the air before disappearing from their view.

Without giving it much thought, Nathan slid a hand across the threshold of the portal. His translucent fingers, while still blue, appeared solid on the other side. Reaching farther in, up to his elbow, Nathan realized he felt something for the first time. It tingled as though he'd fallen asleep on his arm.

He turned to show the rest of the group, only to find Rabiah at the edge of the bubble, frantically waving her arms in warning and yelling something. While he had no idea what she was saying, her message was clear, and he immediately pulled his hand back. Upon seeing this, she let out a sigh. Nathan slumped his shoulders, wishing she had explained all the rules before they'd started this, but assumed they would've been talking for days had she tried to explain every detail.

Rabiah gestured for Brohm to join her, speaking to him, then pointing at the edge of the black glass circle. Brohm shook his head, then glanced to Nathan with new tears threatening to form. Cormac gently pulled him away, having him sit down, and then took his place at Rabiah's side. Both the monk and Rabiah offered a raised hand—a silent goodbye. Nathan returned it, but

kept his gaze on Brohm. The big man sat hunched over, hands covering his face as he cried.

Before Nathan could consider doing anything else, Cormac laid his foot atop the glass circle and leaned his weight onto it. A crack formed, and the bubble immediately collapsed, along with the portal.

Nathan was free in more than one way. Physically, but also emotionally. Had someone asked him to describe it, he would've said it was like standing in an empty room devoid of colour, but even that was an inadequate description. He still hovered before Rabiah and Cormac, however he perceived they no longer saw him. Their eyes focused past to the distant city beyond.

Willing himself to move, he floated toward Brohm's slouched form. Seeing him in such pain should've been devastating, yet instead of sadness, Nathan felt nothing. Even attempting to consider the concept of sadness was like grasping smoke—impossible. Regardless, he knew he loved Brohm, despite the notion becoming as hazy as his vision.

He reached out, laying a hand—now nearly transparent—on Brohm's back. The big man shifted and turned toward him, eyes searching blindly. Nathan moved his hand to Brohm's cheek, and he reacted. It wasn't pain, but he clearly felt something, and he touched his face in reaction to it. With growing enthusiasm, he grasped at the air, his hands drifting through Nathan's invisible form.

Nathan should've smiled, but had forgotten how. Even though Brohm was right beside him, he found it difficult to recognize his face. The haze wasn't black or white, it was the absence of everything. He should've been frightened, but the trivialities of fear were beyond him now. Oblivion was almighty and all-consuming, and he welcomed it with open arms.

Epilogue

A delicate breeze carrying the mixed scent of grass and wild flowers woke Brohm from his slumber. Sunlight filtered through fluttering curtains, dancing across his closed eyes. Distant birds, their song a complex suite of trills, drifted on the wind. He'd slept in again, not that it mattered. Sleep was the only thing he had energy for.

Nathan had visited him in his dreams again. Brohm could never remember the details, but that wasn't important. All that mattered was to see his smiling face again. Eyes still closed, he reached under the blankets to Nathan's side. The mattress was painfully cold. It always would be, but that didn't make it any easier to accept the truth. A ball of anger welled up within his core. He was tired of this self-loathing, but too often he found himself in a hole with no memory of falling in. He kicked the sheets off the bed roughly in an attempt to force himself up. Instead, he remained on his back and stared at the ceiling—his will summed up to nought.

No.

Baring his teeth, he coerced his body upright, turned, and planted his feet on the floor. He slapped himself across the face.

"Stop it!"

Voicing his anger tended to break the train of negative thoughts, but only temporarily. Another blow stung his cheek. And again, harder still. He felt a fool doing so, but the violence of it helped in its own way. It brought him back to reality. He knew Nathan would've never wanted him to linger on the pain—the heavy loss he carried—but try as he might, it was stronger than his will.

Tears burned his eyes. After all this time, how could they still flow so easily?

"Stop!" he cried out, slapping himself again, but the blow was a pale semblance of the previous strikes.

Brohm needed out of this room. Stomping to the wardrobe, he donned the first thing he laid his hands on, and slipped into a pair of boots. He managed to reach the door, about to unlatch it, when the bedside table beckoned him. He eyed the drawer.

With a long sigh, he lumbered across the room and pulled the drawer open. Within sat a solitary piece of paper, neatly folded in two. He bit his lip, hesitating a moment before making a decision. His thick fingers fumbled at the paper, as though fighting against his choice to take it. He slid it carefully into his breast pocket and headed downstairs.

The common area was mostly empty and mercifully silent. Since Nathan's death, he had no patience for laughter. Anyone's joy invoked a blind rage within him—a familiar mood that only brought trouble. One particularly

hard night, he managed to get into a scrap with a *too-happy* guy with a big mouth—that asshole, Ollie. As soon as the blood flew, Brohm managed to stop himself and apologize to the man, but that did nothing to mend the broken nose he'd given him.

Brohm stood at the bottom of the stairwell, considering his options. Leah, with a tray in hand while gathering dirty dishes, saw his confusion. She approached him, leaving the tray behind.

"Hey, Sid. Did you sleep okay?"

She knew enough to keep her bubbly self to a minimum, and Brohm loved her for it.

"Yuh, I guess," he said, shrugging.

Leah reached up to gently cup his cheek, her hand cool against his face. "What did you do? It's all red."

"It's nothin'," he said, subtly nudging her hand away.

"Edgard's probably got something still warm from lunch. You want a plate?"

Brohm shook his head.

"C'mon, you need to eat something."

"Not hungry. Maybe later."

Leah glared at him a moment before her features softened. "I know you don't want to hear it, but I worry about you."

Brohm ground his teeth, but not because of her concern. During the time Nathan was stuck in his waking coma, she and Brohm had grown close—like a sister he never had. The last thing he wanted to do was worry her, and that irked him. She deserved so much better than that. He leaned down and, much to her surprise, gave her a hug. A giggle—one Brohm hadn't heard since his return—escaped her lips. She was so small in his arms, yet her heart was bigger than anyone he knew.

"Yuh, I know you do," he said. "I'll be okay. Reckon I just need more time."

She kissed his red cheek. "Then I'll be waiting for you."

Brohm fought back tears again. His emotions always sat so close to the surface, and nearly anything set them off. It was exhausting.

Leah returned to her work, leaving him standing lost again, unsure what he wanted. Slits of sunlight poured in through the windows, calling him outside. With no reason to fight it, he stepped onto the veranda and leaned forward against the railing.

The courtyard was deserted, but voices carried out from one of the outbuildings. Men working, doing something. The familiar rhythm of Zoe's hammer on iron echoed from the backyard. Brohm was so disconnected from the happenings of the guildhouse, he had no idea how it ran itself. Nathan and Brohm had put in the work to establish it, but now he questioned his involvement. He couldn't decide if he still wanted to be part of it. Without Nathan, what was the point?

Behind him, the door opened. He realized now it always squeaked, and that irritated him, yet he never could be bothered to oil it. A familiar shuffle drew near.

"Hey, Cormac," he said, keeping his gaze to the courtyard and road beyond.

The monk's hand touched his arm in greeting before leaning against the rail beside him, but otherwise he said nothing. Much to Brohm's disbelief, he'd grown to appreciate Cormac's presence. Never had he been so wrong in judging someone. Right from the start, Nathan saw the truth in Cormac's actions. Brohm, in stark contrast, had such a difficult time accepting the monk. All his life, Brohm observed others twist the word *help* as a way to deceive. Ulterior motives were often the goal. If he were honest with himself, he could be just as selfish, but Nathan had changed all that.

"I hit myself again," he said.

"I will admit 'tis a questionable form of coping," Cormac replied with a friendly smirk.

"Yuh, I know. But it's easy."

"It might be easy, but it doesn't contribute to long-lasting results. Don't be hard on yourself, Sid."

Despite Cormac knowing Brohm and Nathan's true name, they'd agreed to never speak them.

"It's been weeks since we got back, but every day still feels like the first," Brohm said. "I hate feeling this way. I know *he'd* be mad at me."

Cormac laid a hand on Brohm's arm again. "The pain you feel, 'tis heartache. How could he be angry at you for loving him?"

Brohm huffed in reply.

"We've talked about this before. You just need to give it time," Cormac said.

"Yuh," Brohm drawled, "but how long is this gonna last?"

It felt like the day Nathan left him on the bluffs north of Etton Crossing would never fade. After the magick blue circle collapsed, Nathan disappeared. Yet moments later, something touched him. There was no way to know for sure, but Brohm was convinced it was him. It didn't last long, though, and he crawled on his knees like a madman, reaching out blindly. In hindsight, he was ashamed by his behaviour, but try as he might, he couldn't accept Nathan was gone. What troubled Brohm most was his ignorance of what became of him. Rabiah couldn't provide an answer, and Cormac's response brought more confusion than clarity. He spoke of faith in the gods—belief in something larger than all of them. Cormac believed there was *something* after death, but what that entailed, no one could know or comprehend. Was it possible Nathan was beside him now? Was he somewhere else? Or just gone?

During that time, Brohm felt just as lost. His mind unwilling and unable to function. While he'd never spoke of it—maybe one day he would—Brohm was relieved Cormac came back with him instead of staying at Etton

Crossing. He never asked his reason, and didn't want to know. During their long trip back to the guildhouse, the monk managed to break through his defences and help him cope with his loss. Brohm couldn't have imagined riding that road alone with only his grief to keep him company.

"I have an idea that might help pull you out of your rut," Cormac said. "Every day, you need to complete a task. Something positive."

Brohm sagged against the railing.

"Fret not. The task need not be monumental."

Considering his words, Brohm turned his attention past Cormac, pointing at the door. "It squeaks."

"Perfect! Let's fix that. Lead the way."

Brohm frowned at him, but the monk stood undeterred.

"Alright. Fine."

He headed to the backyard—to Zoe's workshop—with Cormac in tow. Noticing the shift in light from the doorway, Zoe stopped hammering and glanced his way.

"Hey," she said.

Despite living in the same building together for over half a year, Brohm never felt the need to befriend Zoe. Her aloof nature spoke louder than words, and he respected the boundaries she clearly displayed. She had nothing to prove, and a part of him envied such confidence. More than once, he'd heard from guild members commenting on her skill. He figured that helped.

Cormac's head squeezed between Brohm and the doorframe. "Good afternoon. We're in need of an oil can. 'Tis something you have?"

Zoe nodded and opened a nearby cabinet. Its contents were well organized, matching the entirety of the smithy.

"Bring it back when you're done, okay?" she said, handing Brohm a can of oil with a spigot on top.

"Yuh. Thanks."

Not wanting to intrude any further, Brohm retreated from the workshop and returned to the veranda. The front door hinges were rusty and would need to be replaced, but for now, a few drops of oil made a world of difference. Swinging the door open and closed was now a silent affair.

"How do you feel now?" Cormac asked.

Brohm hated to admit it, but the monk was right. For a short time, he felt normal again. He nodded reluctantly.

"You see?" Cormac continued. "Forcing yourself to do something stopped your mind from focusing on the grief."

Brohm gave him a thin smile.

"Now, I'm sure there are many small tasks that need doing around here," Cormac said. "I want you to create a list. Each day, complete one task and scratch it off. Remember, the size of the task isn't important. 'Tis doing the task that matters. 'Tis the feeling of accomplishment that will help you."

"Okay."

“Even better, if you need help, come find me.”

The monk patted Brohm on the back, and then reentered the guildhouse, making a point to swing the silent door a few times before shutting it.

Brohm leaned against the railing again. After any brief respite from his grief, he always found it difficult to fight back its inevitable return. This time, however, the blanket of sorrow had lightened. There was no denying Cormac had a gift for helping others. Brohm wished he’d accepted it sooner.

The oil can still in hand reminded him of Zoe’s request, and he returned to her workshop, finding her in the process of bending hot iron.

“Thanks. Can you put it back, please?” she asked.

“Yuh, sure.”

He opened the cabinet and returned the can to its home, careful to place it just as he’d seen it. Not wanting to trouble her any further, he stepped outside.

The long grass, the treeline covering the ravine, and mountain peaks filled his view. More than once, Brohm caught Nathan seemingly lost gazing upon it, and spoke of its beauty. There was no denying its winsomeness, but he believed Nathan perceived something more. A pang of regret welled within him, and he wished he’d asked him to explain it further. Perhaps the more time he spent surrounded by nature, studying it, he’d come to understand Nathan’s fascination.

The grass swayed hypnotically in the breeze. A smile crossed his face, recalling the time they’d spent sprawled there. He stepped into the long grass, but couldn’t find the spot from his memory. Perhaps the grass had bounced back after being flattened—he wasn’t sure—but it didn’t matter to him. After stomping a new area flat, he laid down at its centre. Taking a deep breath, he drew in the earthy aroma mixed with the freshly broken grass. Clouds lingered, in no hurry to be anywhere. Birdsong, distant yet ever-present, caught his ear. Was there more to it? What was he missing? If only Nathan could just tell him.

Brohm’s only remaining connection to him was held in his breast pocket. He’d read it so many times that he could probably recite it from memory. But to see it—his pen strokes scratched onto the paper—made it seem like he was there with him now. Slipping his fingers into his pocket, he gently pulled the paper free and unfolded it, steeling himself for the inevitable.

Brohm,

If you’re reading this, it means I’m gone. I woke up with the pain again, but it’s still early morning, so I’m writing this while you sleep. You look like a giant, adorable, snoring lump under those blankets.

In case I never get a chance to tell you the truth, I’m dying from that stupid bite. The toxin is in my blood. When Rabiah

brought us to that doctor, I asked him about it, and he said there was no cure. I won't describe the outcome, but it's terrifying.

I'm sorry I never told you. I agonized over it so many times. I just don't want you to worry. I want to finish this mess with Theodrik and enjoy whatever time we have left.

When we first met, I pushed you away. Sure, I explained my reasons why, but had you not stayed by my side, the world I know would've been dull and grey. I just wish we had more time together.

I can't put into words how much I love you. I won't even try. Just know you've made me a better person, and I hope I've brought you the same joy you've given me.

I'm sorry I had to leave you, but it was never my choice.

Forever yours,
Nathan

It surprised Brohm to find a smile on his face. Every time he read the letter, he'd fall to inconsolable sobs. Sometimes, he'd be unable to finish it. Folding and slipping it back into his pocket, he laid a hand atop it—the only way to have Nathan close to his heart.

"You made me a better person, too," he whispered. "Thank you, Nathan."

The grass swayed again, bringing him back to the world around him. It would take time to heal from the loss, but now, he knew each day would be better than the last.

About The Author

Mike Carss is Canadian, hailing from Ottawa, better recognized for his music than his prose. Mike's literary journey started innocently enough in 2013 with *Deeds of Their Past*. What began as a short narrative developed into a fantasy adventure novel that followed the travels of two morally dubious characters.

The sequel, *Strength of Fate*, was a long time coming. Half of the first draft was created soon after *Deeds* was published. Unfortunately, with limited time available to pursue his hobbies, the music took precedence, leaving the story untouched for nearly seven years.

At the beginning of 2022, music production became Mike's full-time career.

This provided more opportunities to pursue other passions, and the possibility of finishing the manuscript was now within his grasp. In well-timed sync with this shift in his life, a reader reached out to inquire about Nathan and Brohm's continued adventure, which was alluded to in the closing chapter of *Deeds*. This conversation gave Mike the motivation he needed to dust off his ancient laptop and finally delve back into the manuscript to complete it.

While Nathan and Brohm's journey concludes with *Strength of Fate*, this doesn't mean the end of Mike's writing endeavours. Seeds for future novels have been germinating, and while no plans are set in stone, he hopes that his next story won't take a decade to complete.

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